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Ougi Light

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If I had to say it, then Jouraku Ochiba was indeed the originator of this disturbance, but even now, I still feel that that truth does not sit right with me. Far from being difficult to swallow, it was as though I couldn't swallow it at all. Neither the heat nor the cold of that truth could pass through my throat. If this were the usual, then I would list some special characteristics about her to get things off to a good start, but when it came to Jouraku Ochiba, I had no idea what to write, what I should write, and what I didn't want to write about her.

Because she had no special characteristics.

There was nothing special to note about her.

There was nothing to note about her, not even "not special".

There was no way to fill in this blank paper.

Just between us—I, or rather, *we* are entertained by those that are entertaining, and interested in those that are interesting. We're crazy about oddballs and freaks, and abnormally in love with abnormal people. We like geniuses, and love idiots.

We hold special feelings for special people.

And we want to write down their stories.

But for Jouraku Ochiba, that was not the case.

She was not a young lady that wielded stationery, she was not a lost child that came biting at you, she was not a superstar beyond one's reach, she was not a middle schooler that was nothing but cute, and she was not a class representative among class representatives.

She was Jouraku Ochiba.

Of course, in trying to track down the origin, or perhaps the culprit, of the situation, I was able to get somewhat of an understanding of her profile. And while it took a long time for us to meet due to the sparseness of the information, I get the feeling it wouldn't have changed much even if the contents of that profile had been entirely different.

There was no precedent for such a development.

Or so I'd like to say, but there'd been heaps and loads of these sorts of things in the past... And I simply hadn't realized due to my own inattention. There were surely more people like Jouraku Ochiba besides the person herself... A massive amount of them.

To an immeasurable degree.

Though she was the true culprit, or the villain of this story, it didn't actually need to be her—the mastermind could have just as easily been anyone else. It could have been him, or her, or anyone, or even me.

In fact, I would even think like this... It's strange.

Why hadn't it been me?

It wasn't as though I didn't feel any anger—it wasn't as though my blood hadn't been boiling due to her having stirred things up around me. And letting one's anger get the better of them was a situation that could happen to anyone.

No.

It was a *mistake* that could happen to anyone.

So—I suppose I had to forgive her.

No matter how extensive and devastating the harm was, no matter how many problems would occur in the future as a result, and no matter how much unrecoverable damage she had done—I suppose we had to forgive her.

Even if she did not utter a single word of apology.

“I will not apologize. I will not utter a single word of apology.

“I will not beg. I will not kneel.

“I will not bow my head.

“I will not atone for my sins. I will not ask for forgiveness. I will not pay the price.

“Because I’m in the right. I’m not in the wrong. No matter what anyone says, no matter how anyone scolds me, no matter how anyone rebukes me, logic is on my side.

“Apologizing means admitting defeat.

“I don’t want to lose. So I won’t apologize.

“But, say, even if I don’t apologize, does that mean I win? I don’t think that’s the case at all. At least, I don’t feel that refreshing sense of victory.

“It’s even unpleasant.

“In that sense, shogi players are pretty impressive—I can’t help but respect them, besides their outstanding abilities. They’re teaching others the feeling of respect. After all, though it’s different from an apology, if they don’t see any chance of winning on the game board, there’s that merciless rule that requires them to say, ‘I’ve lost,’ and admit defeat from their own mouths, right?

“It would be humiliating because they’re so outstanding.

“Regardless of if you’re the *meijin* or a ranked player.

“They say that golf is a gentleman’s sport with no referee, but shogi isn’t without its worth, either—although, if it were me, I’d just flip over the shogi board in desperation.

“I will not admit defeat.

“In other words, I wonder if I’m not at fault if I don’t admit that I’m at fault, in the same way that I haven’t lost if I don’t think that I’ve lost.

“If I don’t apologize, then it may not be my victory, but not apologizing means I can deny that I’m the bad guy—in that case, I’m completely clean.

“Clean and pure.

“Naturally, I’m completely innocent.

“Is it like how the most cleanliness-obsessed people have the messiest rooms?

“Although my room is on the clean side—I wonder if there are shogi players like that.

“Sore losers that just stay quiet, no matter how pressured they are, in order to run down the clock rather than admit their own defeat—if there were, I’m sure they would be scorned by many, but I would

sympathize with such a figure.

“‘Figure’?[1]

“How laughable, for that to come from me.

“In any case, exposing any person with ability or position in a state of surrender to the public eye—like the live broadcasts of shogi matches, or the apology press conferences of corporations or politicians or celebrities—they sure are cruel shows.

“I’m sure there are more than a few shogi fans who watch on their TVs just to see some great player, who would have been a wise general in the Warring States period, mentally yield.

“There aren’t?

“I’m the only one who’d be so ill-natured?

“Is that so.

“I’ve misspoken. I suppose I’ve shown my true colors.

“But I will not apologize.

“You’re the one who should apologize—Araragi Koyomi.”

“When it comes to stories—”

After she began to speak, Meniko quickly followed up with a, “Whoooops, I didn’t mean to say ‘stories’,” correcting herself.

“When it comes to all things,[2] they say that there are two siiides, the front side and the back side[3], but I wonder how things really aaare? Is the front side a part of the back side? Or is the back side a part of the front side?”

I felt that she didn’t especially need to correct herself when posing that riddle, and that it would have worked just fine if “all things” was left as “stories” instead, but either way, it was most likely the case that Meniko did not intend to raise any profound philosophical questions. Because Hamukai Meniko, my only friend on the campus of Manase National University, was not that kind of girl.

She was completely disconnected from any sort of profound meaning.

That said, she wasn’t exactly the shallow sort, either... To put it how she would put it, I would say that she enjoyed a profound lack of meaning.

In any case, for those that knew me, Araragi Koyomi, as a high schooler, the idea that I’d made a friend may be almost as shocking as the idea that I’d given birth to a baby, but even I am shocked at myself.

I won’t make friends, because my strength as a human would decrease—though I’d been the kind of guy that would stubbornly insist on such a thing, I’d shamefully reformed myself and been reborn anew. Or so it should have been, but with nine months having passed since entering university, I’d still only managed to make a single friend... Normally, you could make more friends just from playing a smartphone game.

I’d signed the treaty of friendship with Meniko right after entering university, so I’d started thinking, whoa, things might be a bit different for me in university. But, against my expectations, there wasn’t the slightest of differences. A slight increase was just a slight increase, and depending on your point of view, it could even be a sharp decrease. Stubbornly holding onto traditions, my isolationism remained unchanged.

For the record, if we’re talking about friends I would meet only on campus, then I could include Kujaku-chan, who wasn’t on the school register, but if I decided to count her among my friends, the signs of my growth would be even less visible.

You might even say I’m regressing.

Incidentally, when it came to my childhood friend, Oikura-chan, I'd currently cut ties with her. Seriously, she was as hot-tempered as always, that troublesome girl. Just because I'd moved into the apartment next to hers.

Something needed to be done about that temper of hers. That is, *I* needed to do something.

Putting that aside, let's answer the question that came from my only friend. She's my only friend, after all.

I had to cherish my friends. As a human being.

The philosophy that I held ended up turning into an extremely common slogan, but anyway, let's respond to the riddling question that had been posed to me while I had been studying in the cafeteria for second-semester exams—of course, it was obvious that the question was a riddle.

"The front and the back? Ah—"

As I faintly recalled a high school junior of mine whose livelihood was to be puzzling, I ruminated over her words... What had she said? Is the front a part of the back, or is the back a part of the front? Aha, I bet the key point behind these two options is that she didn't ask, "Is the front in front of the back, or is the back behind the front?"

I could feel the gears in my brain turning.

"The front side is a part of the back side, right?"

That was my answer. If only I could exchange this answer for credits, so that I didn't have to keep studying for my exams... Although, I suppose my life has been full of girls teaching me how to study.

"Mhm, mhm. And the reason iiis?"

"The reason is, how you write the kanji. Inside the kanji for 'back side' [裏], there's the kanji for 'front side' [表]."

Basically, "the front side [表] is a part of the back side [裏]".

[亠] + [口] + [表] = [裏].

The stroke order was completely different, but that's the idea.

If you put a cover on the front door [表口]—it becomes a back door [裏].

"Correeect. Woohoooo!"

With a generous round of applause, Meniko cheered.

Personally, I wanted to send those cheers right back at her for noticing such a thing in the first place, but considering she was the kind of eccentric that enrolled in the mathematics department in order to major in cryptography, a question like this might be the basics of the basics for her. In terms of mysteries, it was like Edogawa Shoho.[4]

I felt like that was the sort of thing that made my only friend the kind of girl she was, but at the same time, I couldn't help but feel

that she was testing me. Though I was in the middle of studying for tests.

Was this some kind of psychology test?

"No, no, I'm really impressed. You did a good job figuring that out without even writing it down, Koyomi-chaaan. You must have a whiteboard in your head."

"Heh. In elementary school, this Koyomi-chan wasn't called Gonsuke the sweet-potato-digging robot just for show."

Perhaps it would land for a vampire that lived for six hundred years, but it was a risky gamble to think that a *21 Emon* reference would land for a university student from my own generation, but Meniko laughed with an "Ahahahahaaa."

Well, she'd laugh at anything I said.

As a result, I became a bit of a thrill-seeker.

"It's an emoji, huuuh. The kanji for Koyomi [暦] does look like a robot. I'm envious."

"Although I've never felt happy about my name looking like a robot."

"It's fiiine. 'Meniko' has the kanji for 'deathday', after all. I'm living my life thinking about how everyday is somebody's deathday. Deathdays all the tiiime."

That's too *many*.[5]

Personally, rather than Meniko, her family name of Hamukai seemed more peculiar, but when I'd asked her about it before, it seemed she was partial to it because it reminded her of hamsters. Apparently, she'd kept a hamster in the past… Though I couldn't shake off the suspicion that it was *because* her family name was Hamukai that she kept a hamster instead of a dog or cat.

It was like, which came first, the egg [卵] or the egg [玉子]?[6]

Her attention to detail when it came to the impressions of the written characters was really something.

In fact, I'd written the characters for "front side" and "back side" countless times over the course of my life, but I had not once thought about something like that until this very day. I probably wouldn't be able to write those kanji again without being conscious of it… It may not be an exaggeration to say that it changed my outlook on life itself.

Well, no, it would be an exaggeration. But in that sense, despite Japanese being one of my weaker subjects, it was pretty amazing that Meniko still got along with me… Then again, in Meniko's case, it wasn't as if her group of friends was limited to only me. She boasted rather thick bonds of friendship.

She was supposedly a member of twenty-five clubs.

It was already a surprise to me that there were as many as

twenty-five clubs.

Did everyone really have things they wanted to do that much?

It was the kind of character you couldn't really find amongst my friends from high school… Hanekawa, the honor student, was never the kind of person to have many friends, and even the communication demon named Kanbaru was still specialized in her particular field.

And that girls' basketball club may have looked refreshing on the outside, but inside it had been surprisingly murky. So filled with mud that if it got on your clothes, it wouldn't come off.

However, the fact that this "front and back" question was not necessarily restricted to the appearances of the written characters showed off the depths of Hamukai Meniko.

Her deep-rootedness… A deep-rooted meaninglessness.

"In stories, I mean, in all things, they say there's a front side and the back side, but reeeally, the front side is a part of the back side, riiight?"

That was how Meniko continued.

Instead of giving me an explanation on the *abc* conjecture.

"Recentlyyy, I've been thinking about the asymmetry of antonyms. The opposite of up isn't necessarily down, the opposite of right isn't necessarily left, the opposite of front isn't necessarily back, and the opposite of aloud isn't necessarily forbidden, riiight?"[7]

"Isn't there something wrong with that last one?"

"And the opposite of receiving harm isn't necessarily causing harm."

With that, her eyes flicked towards me, giving me a meaningful gaze. Or, rather than a gaze, she was making eye contact with me. As though she were saying, "Here's the fundamental point!" As her friend, it was difficult to ignore her looking at me like that.

It was time to test my fundamentals.[8]

Fortunately, when it came to "victim" and "perpetrator" and other related words, I'd been blessed with the opportunity to deepen my reflections of them for nineteen years. Or perhaps it was more apt to say that I'd suffered through those reflections, but regardless, that Hawaiian-shirt guy had scolded me pretty harshly about this.

That he hated those who played the victim—but anyway, the asymmetry of receiving and causing harm? Meniko sure made it sound complicated.

Just by not using the words "victim" and "perpetrator".[9]

It was easy to see that concepts like up and down and right and left were relative, and that they could be completely flipped around when reflected in a mirror, but weren't "receiving harm" and "causing harm" perfectly symmetrical?

Depending on how you looked at it, a perpetrator could actually be a victim, so perhaps she meant it in that way by including the “person” component… It was a negative cycle. And in that case, it was no longer a matter of the written characters but a problem of society.

Behind the front was the back, but behind the back was… the back?

They say things are two sides of the same coin, but the fact that the front and the back of a coin are fixed is what makes a coin toss possible… If “heads” and “tails” were entangled like some sort of ouroboros, then a game of American football would never begin.

Not that I’d ever played American football. But regardless, the conversation would never begin. Neither the conversation, nor all things, nor stories.

All right, now to respond to her eye contact.

Although it could easily have been a no-look pass.

“Meniko, what happened? If it’s advice you need, I’m always here for you. That’s the kind of guy I am.”

“That’s riiight. That’s the kind of guy you are, Koyomi-chaaan. How reliable.”

It was a bit hard to follow up when she took my attempt at humor so seriously. It was like I was one beat off. And the fact that she thought that I was the kind of guy that thought that he was that kind of guy was also off. In the first place, these sorts of careless promises had cornered me one too many times when I was in high school, and it seemed that wouldn’t change now that I was in university. I really didn’t learn my lesson. If anything, *that* was the kind of guy I was.

With a frivolous answer, I’d destroy myself.

With a frivolous answer, I’d dig two graves.[10]

Like digging a grave at the bottom of another grave.

“Weeell, if something happened… I guess I became a victim…? Although in my case, it was more like I suddenly ran into, liiike, a ghost or an apparition.”

“A victim—”

A ghost. An apparition?

Urban legends. Street gossip. Secondhand rumors.

Even allowing for exaggeration—it had a familiar ring to it.

But I couldn’t just remain nostalgic.

“...What do you mean, specifically?”

“Rather than specifically… I guess it was more like physically…? You see, it was liiike…”

As Meniko began spinning her pen, she began responding to my question… Well, she was actually spinning a stylus pen, very much

appropriate for a modern university student, but the words she spoke were very much words that a future expert of cryptography would come up with. Those words were severely old-fashioned, severely captivating, and just plain severe.

“Before I realized iiit… Apparently, I was night-crawled upooon.”[11]

“If you do something wrong, you say ‘sorry’.

“That’s basic manners. It’s not like I wasn’t taught as much during my childhood—I didn’t remember if it was my school teacher, or my parents, or my grandparents, or some old man I didn’t know, but I was properly taught by that person.

“But at the same time, I was taught this.

“If everything could be resolved simply by saying ‘sorry’, there’d be no need for the police.

“...Of course, seeing as you’re the eldest son of a family of police officers, you’d probably erupt with objections to such a slogan.

“If everything could be resolved simply by saying ‘sorry’, then your family would lose their jobs—of course, the idea that a police officer’s job only involves cracking down on bad guys is also quite prejudiced.

“It’s something you might occasionally see in police dramas, the threat of one’s boss saying, ‘I’ll send you off to the driving test center!’... Even I can’t help but think that that deserves an apology.

“After all, it’s an extremely important job, isn’t it?

“If it was a society where all ten million police officers in the country had only the job of granting driver’s licenses, wouldn’t that be such a peaceful utopia—hm?

“There aren’t even ten million police officers in Japan?

“‘One person in ten being a police officer, this ain’t the Principality of Monaco,’ you say?

“What’s wrong with Monaco? It’s much more peaceful than Japan.

“Although, their excellent public order is in no small part due to the security cameras installed throughout the country—yes, security.

“The prevention of crime is also a job of police officers, isn’t it—the topic has digressed[12] in an international direction, but since I’ve reached my desired conclusion, I suppose there’s no need for an apology.

“There’s no need to say ‘sorry’.

“A pardon for that permit[13]—is it called a ‘license’ because you'll 'allow' it 'for their sake'?[14]

“Anyway, even though I said it was a utopia, that’s just being idealistic—in reality, if someone were to tell me something like, ‘If everything could be resolved simply by saying “sorry”, there’d be no need for the police,’ then I would want to be defiant and say that I wouldn’t apologize.

“Even now, I don’t want to apologize.

“So that makes me want to apologize even less.

“After all, things wouldn’t be resolved just because I said ‘sorry’, right? Then apologizing is meaningless, isn’t it—no, really, this is a pretty common topic of conversation.

“There are plenty of cases where, rather than having things be resolved with an apology, the apology can actually make things worse—I’m sure you’ve experienced cases like that, too.

“Cases that weren’t case-by-case.

“There’s apologizing because you believe you’re in the wrong, and there’s apologizing because you seek forgiveness, but actually, it’s probably always precisely in between the two—because you believe you’re in the wrong, you seek forgiveness and thus apologize.

“Things wouldn’t be resolved with a ‘sorry’, so I’ll say, ‘excuse me’.[15]

“But, if it weren’t possible to make such a deal, then wouldn’t you say it’s human nature to think that there would be no merits to giving in and apologizing?

“If you think calculations like ‘merits’ and ‘deals’ are not appropriate for the act of apology, then I suppose the reflexive ‘ah, sorry’ that you might say when you bump into someone in the hallway or step on someone’s foot is really the most sincere kind of apology.

“Nevertheless, that is also the truth.

“An apology made without reserve is the easiest to forgive without reserve—a formal apology ends up begging for a formal forgiveness.

“Even if you wanted to just let it go, that wouldn’t be forgiven.

“Forgiving a person is just as hard as apologizing to a person, isn’t it?

“So I won’t apologize.

“And I won’t forgive.”

What I held in my hand was not a stylus pen but my favorite ballpoint pen (I only favored ballpoint pens), and incidentally, I was too clumsy to be able to spin a pen, so I had simply been holding it, but that pen had fallen out of my hand before I realized—night-crawling?

By night-crawling, did she mean *that* night-crawling?

"That's riiight. That term you see often in classical literatuuure.

"Um, I'm willing to highly appraise your effort to deliberately weaken the nuance of the term by associating it with classical literature, but—"

Eh? Wasn't that kind of a big deal?

Because she'd brought it up so flippantly and casually in the middle of studying for exams in the cafeteria, I'd nearly been swept up by that mood and treated it as something casual myself, but the matter at hand turned out to be an ancient cultural practice beyond the level of a mere urban legend. In terms of concepts that did not fit into the modern era, it rivaled the concept of *droit du seigneur*.[16]

Her choice of words was befitting of the most humanities-oriented person in the mathematics department, and you could even say it was the peak of literary expression… It was true that there was a time when the entertainment world amused themselves with that word, and it may have been seen in the eighties, but these days, it was a power word—no, a taboo word—that you would never see in any hit manga.

"I-isn't this a matter you should discuss with the proper authorities, not me…? If you want me to accompany you, then of course—have I already told you that my parents are police officers?"

"First time I'm hearing about iiit."

Whoops. I'd revealed it so easily.

It was bothersome in various ways, so I liked to keep my parents' occupations a secret—but whatever. Meniko was aiming to join the Metropolitan Police Department in the future, so I would have needed to tell her about it, anyway. There was no reason it couldn't be now.

Or rather, there was no better time than now.

I'd come into this expecting something on the level of, "I'm not sure if I should change my old smartphone now, or wait for the newest model to come out," and ended up stepping onto dreadfully private territory, but I couldn't pull back now.

Should I be hugging her? No, if I, a boy, went to hug a girl that

had been night-crawled upon, that probably wouldn't serve as encouragement.

Even so, night-crawling?

The last volume was about child abuse, and the volume before that involved a kidnapping. I'd vaguely sensed it ever since we entered the university student arcs, but now that the anime has ended, have tastes reverted back to the early days?

How shameless.

"Meniko, you have a boyfriend, right? Have you talked with that guy from the light music club, yet?"

"I broke up with the light music club guy a whiiile agooo. My boyfriend right now is in the club research club."

"The club research club?"

"Yeeep. I'm sure you already know him, but he's super cooool. He's one year older than me, and I broke up with the light music club guy to go out with hiiim."

"....."

I didn't know at all, though.

I got the impression that it was just a drinking club that didn't really research anything at all, and as expected, her romantic relationships didn't seem to last very long, but that didn't matter. In any case, it would normally be reassuring to hear that she had someone that could support her, but Meniko's thoughtless expression clouded over ever-so-slightly.

"But you seeee. I couldn't talk to him at aaall."

"Hmm… Well, I get that it's a hard topic to bring up, so that's why you came to me, your trusted friend, for advice instead."

"Weeelll, it's true I came to you for adviiice, but that's not iiit. The reason I couldn't talk to that boyfriend is, he's the culprit of that night-crawling."

"Your boyfriend was the one who night-crawled?"

The one from the club research club?

Did that mean it was something like domestic violence within a couple? In the past—that is, in the recent past, not far back enough to be called ancient—cases like that were treated without legal intervention. Like how child abuse was passed off as discipline, this sort of domestic violence was passed off as a lovers' quarrel… Needless to say, nowadays such cases were unmistakably considered criminal acts.

Whether it was a boyfriend, girlfriend, or even a spouse, night-crawling was wrong.

It would change the meaning of companionship.

Strictly speaking, in the dictionary, the definition of "night-crawling" did not contain any criminal elements, but if that boyfriend

from the club research club thought that he would be forgiven simply because he was her boyfriend, that was also a problem and something to focus on. A *kabedon* was only acceptable in manga, and if not there, then in movies. There was no reason to think otherwise.

"A *kabedooon*?"

Meniko tilted her head in doubt, as if a word like that was already considered obsolete to a language expert like her.

"Aaah. That's what's so complex about iiit. The asymmetry of causing and receiving haaarm, it's right theeere,"

said Meniko with a clouded expression.

"Althoooough, it's Koyomi-chan's eyes that look like they're more clouded over."

"Don't say that to a friend you're relying on."

Far from just being cloudy, it seemed like rain might fall from them.

It was my mistake for using a metaphor that could be taken by a language expert and thrown back at me, but anyway, Meniko continued.

"The reason iiis, I've been trying to forgive that night-crawling, thoooough."

"...Huh?"

"I wonder if it's misleading to say I'm trying to forgive hiiim? Weeell?"

I wonder if I seem like a peeervert, said Meniko, sticking out her tongue. But speaking as someone who associated with a particularly perverted underclassman, it was tough to analyze. Er, not that I was some specialist of perverts. But if she'd come to me for advice for that sort of evaluation, then it really was Meniko who was clouded over. Her eyes, that is.

However, her gaze remained clear and cloudless.

"In the first plaaace, I had no intention of being night-crawled upon,"

she said.

No intention of being night-crawled upon?

"That night, we were just supposed to be making love, you seeee."

"Um…"

I glanced around at my surroundings, with my clouded eyes.

My flitting eyes.

You could even say I'd averted my eyes, as if a sex scene had suddenly come on while watching TV together with my family.

Since it wasn't lunchtime, the cafeteria was fairly empty… That was the main reason we'd chosen this place to study for our exams, but that didn't mean it was completely uninhabited.

In a way, compared to a term as old-fashioned as “night-crawling” whose meaning might only come across vaguely, the expression “making love” might be more extreme coming from the mouth of a serious university student, so I’d looked around by reflex. But fortunately, Meniko’s leisurely voice did not carry throughout this open space, so we were not met with disapproving stares.

It depended on what terminology might come up next, but for now, it seemed that it wasn’t necessary to change our location, so I looked back at Meniko, leaned in closer, and continued in a whisper.

“Speaking of which, you did say, ‘before I realized it’... So that didn’t mean that it happened while you were asleep?”

“That’s riiight. It wasn’t, liiike, sleep sex.”

“Ookay, why don’t we go somewhere else, Meniko-san?”

“Aaah, sorry. I guess that was crossing the line for naive little Koyomi-chan.”

As I looked away and made to leave my seat, Meniko grabbed the sleeve of my jacket to stop me. The way she stopped me was kind of cute. It was upsetting to be treated as naive by a friend of equal status, but I concluded that perhaps I’d misheard her saying “drunkard”[17], so I sat back down. I was giving her a second chance. Although, if she had been night-crawled upon by a drunkard, then that in itself was a deep-rooted problem…

“I was just worrying about when this story gets included in the Aoitori Bunko collection in the future.”[18]

Well, if it was for Aoitori Bunko, then no matter how we tried to dress this up as literature, “night-crawling” was already an unacceptable word, but after making that explanation, I revisited my question.

“So, what does this mean, exactly? To sum up what you’ve said up until now, then by mutual consent… The two of you meant to ‘make love’ that night, but afterwards, the other person is insisting that he ‘night-crawled’ upon you?”

“That’s riiight. I wasn’t meaning to be a victiiim, but Boyfie-kun[19] keeps meaning to be a perpetrator.”

So she calls him Boyfie-kun…

That was something I didn’t want to know.

If I were to cut her off there, then far from it being a lovers’ quarrel, it sounded more like she was just boasting about her love life… But I see, so that was the discrepancy between causing and receiving harm.

Aha, I was finally starting to follow along.

The front side and the back side.

There’s even an expression that goes, “Even if the person responsible were to forget, the person who went through it won’t

forget," but even outside of that—even if the person responsible had no ill will and acted with good intentions, as long as the victim considers themselves a victim, the person responsible would be said to have caused harm. To a certain degree, or maybe even to a considerable degree, I would say that reasoning held true, as I myself had experienced such a predicament many times over.

From both perspectives.

However, this time around, the pattern was distinctly the reverse.

In a case where the victim did not consider herself to be the victim, then could we really conclude that the perpetrator actually caused harm?

Even if he had ill will.

Even if he acted with evil intentions.

If the victim did not consider herself harmed, and instead thought of it as a favor to her, then was it really that bad?

A perpetrator with no wrongdoing, and a victim who hasn't been harmed?

There are those that say that you can judge a person by whether or not they apologize even when the other party is not angry… But although I'd gone through hell and nightmares, this was a complete paradoxical theory that I'd never experienced before… No, perhaps that wasn't quite right.

If anything, this was…

In terms of theories—it was secondhand rumors.[20]

"If we were to consider criminal law… There are crimes that require a formal complaint from the victim to prosecute, and crimes that don't… I think recently, these sorts of sex crimes were made into the latter, right?"

"That's riiight. As far as the law goooes. We learned it in claaass. I wonder if it'll come up in our exaaams. There's still the possible interpretation that, if there's no resistance, it's still considered consensual even if it's forceful. But I wonder what they'll do about that imbalance from now ooon."

It was a bit of a course correction, but just for a moment, Meniko returned to being my tutor for the exams.

"No matter what, sex crimes are treated as a sensitive topic, but they just let them slide mildlyyy. But what iiif, it was actually marriage fraaaud?"

"Even if you ask, 'what iiif'..."

Or rather, even if you aaask.

Personally, fraud was also a sensitive topic… It definitely put me on edge. However, even if it was hard for me to react, I got what she was trying to say. Basically, it was the problem of, "If a fraudulent

marriage actually goes through, is that really considered fraud?"

Can a lie that has been told and then pushed through become the truth?

With a reason like "my mother is sick" or "business isn't doing well", they'd rip someone off of their money and cling to their private life, but if that person were to remain deceived to the very end… If the target never caught onto that despicable deception, then could the victim still be considered a victim?

I've also heard that there were a surprising number of victims that tried to defend the marriage fraudsters that got caught… It was probably a little shallow to simply dismiss that as simple Stockholm syndrome.

Love was complex and mysterious.

Like apparitions.

"Exaaactly. This is reversing the sexes, but after mating, the female mantis eats the male mantis… But opinions might be diviiided on whether or not the male mantis is pitifuuul."

"I've also heard that mantises will eat each other even when nothing goes on between them…"

"That goes for both male and female mantises… And it might go for men and women, toooo."

It was a line of thought that sounded profound but was actually an example of profound meaninglessness. However, against that unchanging tone of voice, that eloquence of hers—if I lowered my guard here, I might give some crude, careless advice like, "If it doesn't bother you, then why don't you just leave it alone?" But that would be a regrettably poor level of awareness from me.

I wasn't a high schooler anymore.

I had to hold my own opinions.

If it really didn't bother Meniko, then she wouldn't have come to me for advice, and I couldn't deny the possibility that she was seeking help while concealing her true intentions, like how one would discuss their episodes as though they were about "a friend of a friend"... For example, even while saying that they were "making love", perhaps their relationship had been gradually falling apart… Or maybe, even if he wasn't a drunkard, they'd become drunk off the atmosphere… But, still.

Before, my childhood friend Oikura Sodachi had once set me up as a specialist of child abuse (what sort of grudge did she hold against me?), but when it came to romantic experiences, my knowledge was about as thin as wax paper, so I wasn't sure how to tread into this relationship between university students.

Looking at it like this, I could understand just a little bit why police officers liked to bring up non-intervention in civil cases. If

handled poorly, it could only make things worse, and even draw counter-resentment… However, I was, after all, the son of those parents who stealthily intervened in the homes of others and sometimes even harbored abused children in their own home, all the while working as police officers.

Why don't the two of you just talk it over?

That sort of detached advice was something I would never say, no matter what.

"All right. I'll go and reason with him. You're free to come along if you want, or I can go alone. Just leave it to me. In any case, I'll go and tell that Boyfie-kun of yours, 'If you really love Meniko, then there's no need to feel any guilt.'"

"Bringing up 'love' might be a bit heavy, thoooough."

Koyomi-chan's friendship is also heavy, thoooough, it's in the heavyweight class, said Meniko, forcing a smile as though she were troubled.

She probably *was* troubled.

"I didn't bring this up with you for you to go that faaar. That'll just make things wooorse. Besiiides, since it ended up this way, I was ready to break up with him, anywaaay."

"Really?"

Weren't you all lovey-dovey?

You were making love, but you weren't in love?

"Yeeep. Don't try to reignite a flame that's already burnt ooout. Rather, don't add fuel to the fiiire. If I have to say it, it was the perfect timing, anywaaay. There's a guy that caught my interest, you see. In the lacrosse club."

How flighty. From the light music club to the club research club to the lacrosse club… It almost seemed like she joined twenty-five clubs just to pursue the guys she was interested in.

It really was changing the meaning of companionship.

Was she trying to update the dictionary definition?

"Rather than an update, I just want to go on a date, I gueeess. I'm the type of person that modestly wants to date all the guys I liiike."

"…Then, what exactly is bothering you about the unevenness of receiving and causing harm?"

Was the problem not that things were getting awkward because of the difference of opinions with Boyfie-kun?

"Everything's my fault," "I'm just a bother to others," "bad things happen to people around me," "I'm like a curse"—you could say those sorts of guilt-ridden delusions were on the back side of feelings of omnipotence. Following that logic, it wasn't much different from just claiming, "Oh, I'm just a jinx for everyone."

The back side.

The reverse.

Embarrassing as it was, I myself had the tendency to say stuff like that in the past, but if that is something you want to say, you should just be positive and declare, “I’m a lucky charm for everyone!” instead. Even just saying that can bring cheer to those around you.

So if Meniko wanted to wash her hands of a guy that was hanging his head over the act of making love, then I would respect that decision.

It was their problem, and it was their relationship.

A decision like that, well… It wasn’t something I could completely dismiss as “not my problem”... Hm? No, wait… Was it just my imagination? Was it just a fluke? No, it had to be a fluke. I wasn’t a jinx.

It was just a coincidence.

Like how I just happened to encounter a vampire on her deathbed on that spring break, it was just by chance—just a fluke.

“Mm… It would’ve at least been a little endearing if he *was* hanging his heeead, since there was no actual harm dooone.”

“Huh? What exactly are you suggesting?”

“What’s bothersome is my bodyyy, and what’s suggestive are my pheromones, I gueeess.”

That evasive statement was, I suppose, a demonstration of the characteristics of Meniko’s youth of “never-ending boyfriends” (yes, in this world, there were people who did experience that sort of youth). But, Boyfie-kun wasn’t hanging his head?

She hadn’t mentioned as much, but was Boyfie-kun spreading around the fact that he “night-crawled upon” Meniko like some sort of tale of romance? If that were true, then as her friend, it seemed Araragi Koyomi would have to stain his hands with murder—

“Don’t stain your hands with murdeeer. Don’t paint them reeed.”

“That’ll depend on how this discussion goes. With life in my right hand, and death in my left.”

“What’s that, some hitman’s catchphraaase? Hmm? If he really were spreading that around like some tale of romance, then I would’ve been able to laugh it off, saying, ‘Guess I fell for a dumb one.’ Even if it wasn’t something I could laugh off, I’d be able to take legal action, riiight? But actually, it’s the exact opposite. Well, I guess it’s not the opposite, but the ‘back side’.”

The back side.

Within the back side, the front side is contained.

“He just keeps apologizing,”

said Meniko. As though she were fed up with it.

It was an expression I hadn't seen on her before.

"First, he knelt down in front of me and apologiiized, and then he apologized to my frieeends, and then he went to the club members that didn't even know me and started an apology press conference, apologizing in all directions. Telling everyone what a sinful person he is, just constantly repenting without stopping."

"Repenting—"

An apology press conference.

It was a sight that was pretty familiar in this country, and whether on television and on the Internet, there was always someone apologizing to someone else on a daily basis. The "back side" being, in other words, the tough reality that someone was getting angry at someone else on a daily basis—but even in today's society, where such sights had become an everyday occurrence, Boyfie-kun's apology tour stood out a lot.

Maybe if it really had been a tale of romance… But normally, people did not go around publicizing their guilt-ridden delusions—and for apology press conferences, it was common to hear the criticism of, "I don't know who you're apologizing to, but if you're apologizing you should apologize to the victim", but this didn't seem to even be on that level.

He was apologizing to everyone and anyone.

In this case, the victim did not even consider herself a victim—there wasn't exactly a term that could describe this scenario exactly, but if I had to say it, it was a victimless crime.

To ignore the victim's wishes and apologize out in the open… How should I put it… Depending on how you looked at it, you could almost say it was honorable, the way he judged himself based on his sense of ethics. However—yes, when it came to the person involved.

"When it came to the victim… It could cause actual harm."

They could actually be harmed.

"Exaaactly. It made me not want to show up at the club research club anymooore. Everyone just sees me as a 'victim' of that disgusting night-crawling, and their looks of pity and words of comfort make it really hard for me to staaay, and trying to deny everything one-by-one just seems like an excuuuse…"

The harm done was just as bad as a hooligan publicizing his tale of romance, but that public apology tour really was nasty. You can sue someone for slander even if they're telling the truth, to say nothing of if they're making a false accusation—but this wasn't a false accusation, but a false victimization.

It was tough to be attacked for something you didn't do, but it was probably intolerable to be comforted for harm you didn't even receive.

There would be nothing you could say.

And to that, there was nothing I could say.

"Because I'm like thiiis, I'm kind of used to being slandered, but this is pretty tough, even for meee. If I were being attacked, I could launch a counterattack, so to speeeak, or at least get mad. But how am I supposed to respond to someone who's apologizing?"

It's like violence in the form of an apologyyy.

That was what Meniko said.

"It's not a false confession of a false crime, eitheeer. Everyone seems to respectfully believe that he's not just pretending to admit to his wrongdoing. How respectful of theeem. Even when I tell him to stop, he just won't stooop. Whenever I say something, it's almost like he thinks that he has to apologize even mooore. Apologizing, apologizing, apologizing. Even saying he'll turn himself into the poliiice. Although he'll probably just be turned away at the door. At this rate, it's only a matter of time before he puts up a handwritten letter of apology on the Internet."

"....."

If it went that far, it almost sounded like apology harassment… It was indeed nasty, but it was also kind of frightening.

The fact that Boyfie-kun's true intentions couldn't be understood was especially frightening… Unlike a false confession, it wasn't like he was under duress. He was voluntarily taking on a false charge and going around apologizing, and it was causing actual harm to his own life, as well. It was truly a puzzling act of self-harm that even got his partner involved.

I'd heard that there was a surprising number of people that turned themselves in for crimes they didn't commit… But this example was something I was hearing for the first time.

"Sorryyy. I used asking you for advice as a pretext to complaaain. Honestly, Koyomi-chan, I was never thinking that I wanted you to do something for me. Buuut, when I thought that there was a chance that Boyfie-kun's apology's sphere of influence could reach you, toooo… I decided just now that it would be better if I could tell you about it myseeelf."

After having heard such a bizarre story, I couldn't say her fears were groundless or that she was overreacting… I couldn't say it was a flight of fancy, either. If I hadn't heard from her in advance and some upperclassmen I didn't know apologized for night-crawling upon Meniko, I'd have no idea how to react to that.

In the first place, I had no intention of meeting my friend's boyfriend, but now that things had become like this, he had become an extremely dangerous character that I didn't even want to get near. Imagine being set up as a victim without knowing anything about it…

Was it something like being told, “Sorry for bullying you in the past,” when you had no memory of being bullied by that person? In that case… I understood.

I understood completely. Because.

“Weeell. There’s also the fact that I came up with a clever quiz to give youuu. And I guess the words just slipped out from theeere.”

That was what she was saying, but if you wanted to avoid a future in which you received misdirected pity from me, then my sincere apologies for having you make such a lame excuse instead of being able to give proper advice.

My apologies… But was that feeling of guilt just another misdirected, guilt-ridden delusion? Was it a twisted, back side of omnipotence?

“I hesitated, thooough. Did I really want to drag naive little Koyomi-chan, who’s been steadily dating his girlfriend from high school, into this messy soap operaaa? It might have been too stimulating for youuu.”

“True, instead of Aoitori Bunko, it’s more fitting for the Kodansha Novels label…”

During their *ero guro* romance era, before they entered the *shinhonkaku* era.[21]

Even though the two-row format is in a precarious position.[22]

“But Meniko, it upsets me that you’re treating me like some kid that doesn’t understand the subtleties between men and women. So, I don’t hold any pity, but for what you just told me… For that story of yours, there was something I could empathize with.”

“Empathiiize?”

“Not on the level of telepathy, but yes, empathy. In other words, it’s not something completely unrelated to me.”

I was putting on airs here, or essentially, weakly pretending to be tough.

“Incidentally, you know that girlfriend I’ve been steadily dating since high school? Just the other day, we were talking about breaking up.”

That was what I said.

“Vampires are sometimes called ‘nightwalkers’, but if that is interpreted elegantly, would they become ‘night-crawlers’?—sorry, just making small talk.

“I’m not trying to imply anything.

“Although, since they prefer the blood of virgins, and since they create thralls by sucking blood—in other words, breeding—I can’t deny the apparitions known as vampires are already suggestive themselves.

“Night-crawling.

“I suppose I would describe it as ‘exchanging vows’.[23]

“That’s also a bit suggestive.

“It may not be as much as a deal, but it is a promise—it’s something that won’t occur without the consent of both parties. At the very least, in the legal sense.

“Legal—consensual.

“That’s the key point of the phrase, ‘If you do something wrong, you say “sorry”.’ Earlier, I talked about how a police officer’s job isn’t just to crack down on bad guys, but strictly speaking, it’s not bad guys.

“The ones they crack down on are lawbreakers.

“Because something that is wrong is not necessarily a crime.

“No matter how bad of a person you are, as long as you don’t violate the law, you’ll never be taken in—you might even be able to become a board member of some large company, surely.

“Therefore, rather than, ‘If you do something wrong, you say “sorry”,’ the corrected version should be, ‘If you violate the law, you say “sorry”’—though that might be too complicated of a motto to teach children.

“It’ll be for the slightly older children.

“Although, you’d need to explain what laws are to them.

“Oh, maybe it’s not an explanation, but a justification.

“That would almost make it sound as though you were the one in the wrong—but after all, how else would you explain the rule of law other than, ‘There are a bunch of vague statements that were determined a long time ago and are arbitrarily administered, and no one really understands them that well, but we have to treat them as absolute.’

“The fact that the interpretation of the law could change based on who was reading it made it sound like a worthy challenge for me, as an avid reader myself—it really lit a fire under me, like a book that most people didn’t find readable.

“In other words, instead of explaining or interpreting, it was deciphering that was required—for the law, which had no solution.

“However, there are people who think that that’s a pain, and in fact, those people make up the majority in this world. There are more of them, they are stronger, and yet, they are correct.

“That’s why everybody simply apologizes.

“They do so as easily as taking a step forward.

“‘All right, now in times like these, we should apologize, right?’ As though following instructions like these, they repeat their routine apologies—but I won’t get swept away so easily. I won’t let them sweep me away.

“I’ll interrogate. Like the prosecution.

“I’ll advocate. Like the defense.

“I’ll interpret. Like the judge.

“No matter what happens, I won’t get swept away and apologize, and in fact, even if I’m wrong, I won’t apologize.[24]

“For as long as I live, I won’t apologize.”

007

I didn't want to break down Meniko's pure image of me any more than necessary, so the "small talk" that had digressed from our studying ended up being closed down. But as a matter of fact, when it came to my girlfriend that I had been steadily dating since high school, Senjougahara Hitagi, it was actually the second time we had broken up.

Just for reference, to lightly touch upon the reason for our first breakup, it was merely for something that ran in my blood. Because my childhood friend had been about to be left homeless after shouldering the burden of student loans, I had given her refuge at my place just as my parents had done all those years ago, but Hitagi had gotten terrifyingly mad at me for it.

I suppose this was the opposite of Meniko's Boyfie-kun, but honestly, I still unfortunately did not really understand what I did wrong at all. But after all that, I turned to a realtor that my father knew and was able to introduce Oikura to a cheap place to live without needing a security deposit, a suspiciously lucky find that almost seemed like it could earn her money just by her living there. And somehow or other, things ended without incident… Oikura must have felt a little guilty, because, despite not being one for altruistic deeds, she put her life on the line to mend the rift that had formed between me and Hitagi. That was truly an exceptional situation. It probably won't happen again.

Not even in the next life.

With that, Hitagi and I had gotten back together, and then, when was it again? Ah, yes, just before the end of winter break, right after the beginning of the new year—originally, we'd made plans to go on our first shrine visit of the year together.

It would be our first date of the year, so to speak, and as you may already know, around the beginning of the previous year, we had been put into a situation where we couldn't possibly wish to visit the shrine—not because we were students preparing for entrance examinations, but because we had been cursed to death by a snake god until our high school graduation. It was less of a situation and more of a time of war (the war over entrance examinations could hardly compare). So not only was it our first date of the year, but it was also the first time we were celebrating a kind of anniversary since we'd started dating—therefore, this year for sure, we wanted to properly and peacefully greet the new year with a "Happy New Year".

Even though I didn't like anniversaries, I had to at least celebrate New Year's Day, right?

Of course, our destination would be the Kitashirahebi Shrine.

It had formerly been the shrine ruled by the snake god that had cursed us to death, but now it had become the home of a harmless elementary school fifth-grader and a trusted friend. So on top of being the first shrine visit, it was also in part a time for me to pass along my New Year's greetings.

In any case, at the stylish café that was our meeting place, Hitagi appeared in formal wear that she had probably rented, and the first words out of her mouth were,

"Let's break up, Araragi-kun."

Not a respectful greeting of the new year, but a troubling notice of separation.

No, I didn't want to say it was troubling yet.

What was the point of trying to be funny here?

It was almost embarrassing.

What kind of a joke is this, today isn't the first of April but the first of January, was the interjection I nearly made by reflex (strictly speaking, it wasn't the first of January, because I spent that day celebrating New Year's Day with my family—I even got New Year's money, despite being a university student). But Hitagi had a completely serious expression—or rather, she was completely calm.

Calm.

After entering university, Hitagi had become much more stylish by dyeing her hair, painting her nails, and getting into makeup, so that expressionlessness of hers reminded me of the days when she was still a closed-off young lady.

Had I gone back in time when I came here? No, no, that wasn't it.

She wasn't kidding, and she wasn't joking.

I knew that she was making a completely serious request… It was the second time, after all.

However, unlike the first time where she'd been enraged beyond all decency, her condition now was clearly different—it was completely and utterly different. That said, her calm expression was not completely identical to the one she showed as a closed-off young lady that was composed yet caustic. She seemed almost as though she was exhausted. I would say that not even on last year's New Year's Day, when our lives were in danger, had she looked this desperate.

Of course, such an analysis was something that only was performed somewhere deep in the corner of my mind, and the rest of me was naturally shaken up after suddenly being told to break up at the start of the new year.

"B-break up…? Wh-wh-why?"

I could only arrive at such a reaction that was lacking in

individuality—I could not muster up any of my usual wit. However, if I'd said that I had absolutely no idea what the reason could be, I would be lying. After all, this was already the second time… Now that we were on this subject, it was true that I had done something similar to what I'd done to cause my first breakup. After over half a year as a university student, I'd eventually begun to feel the limits of commuting to the campus by car and thus had moved out to live by myself.

The dream lifestyle of living alone.

I'd moved in next to Oikura. The place I'd mentioned before—that apartment building that was too good to be true.

To be honest, on top of my commute having gotten tiresome, I had also been concerned about Oikura-chan living all on her own, so I spoke to the same realtor and managed to migrate into her neighborhood (rather than close to a station, it was terrifically close)[25]. So I could only think that was what had touched a reverse scale for Hitagi.[26] In Oikura's case, her reverse scale was her entire body, but recently, Hitagi's reverse scales had been found scattered around the general area of this subject.

She must have found out.

I didn't really get the logic behind it, but whenever I worried about Oikura, Hitagi would get angry. In spite of that, Hitagi and Oikura were on relatively good terms, curiously enough… It was such that the two of them would regularly hang out.

Invite me too, please.

Even on campus, though they were in different departments, they still moved around and did various things together. While keeping it a secret from me… (Speaking of which, in her first year of high school, Oikura was also a closed-off young lady, so maybe that's why they got along.) But regardless, that wasn't the reason.

I was completely off base.

She had this to say, instead.

"I simply do not have the right to go out with you, Araragi-kun. I've been far too presumptuous."

"……?"

Having expected to be persecuted, I couldn't help but treat her words with suspicion… She didn't have the right? Presumptuous? It didn't make sense to me at all.

"And yet, to think I took advantage of your compassion and dragged this awful relationship on for so long. From the bottom of my heart, I apologize. I am truly sorry."

"S-sorry? *You* are?"

Senjougahara Hitagi, apologizing? That haughty girl who rarely bowed her head, who would stop after only doing two claps on

a shrine visit[27]—had she really just spoken words of apology without faltering, as if it were entirely natural?

According to my common sense, this was an impossible situation.

What in the world was going on? This world… Had I reincarnated into a different world at the start of the new year? A bizarre new world in which Senjougahara Hitagi apologized?

How terrifying.

Even different worlds had to have their limits.

At the very least, I could tell that it wasn't that she had simply regressed back to being that closed-off young lady… There was no such reversion here. After all, her closed-off young lady era was, out of all of Senjougahara Hitagi's eras, the one in which she was the most aloof and the least likely to apologize. Her expression and tone of voice might have been similarly calm, but her true state was the complete opposite.

Opposite—like one's front and back sides.

"Did something happen, Hitagi? Tell me something, anything. I'm always here for you. That's the kind of guy I am."

Thinking about it, I'd said something pretty irresponsible at the time, too, and if I did say so myself, I was a bit fed up with my own rashness. But Hitagi had no response to this dangerous provocation, instead shaking her head feebly.

"How kind you are, Araragi-kun. How much have I depended on you up until now, without ever realizing that kindness? Just thinking about my sinfulness makes me want to die."

Makes you want to die?

I couldn't hide my bewilderment at hearing this girl, who I considered to be the embodiment of self-esteem, speak of suicidal thoughts. She didn't seem like she was lying or joking, but honestly, she hardly seemed to be in her right mind.

I glanced at my shadow.

The iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade—or her previous existence, "Princess Beauty". When in front of her, anyone would start to want to kill themselves due to their own sinfulness, and I couldn't help but be reminded of that after hearing Hitagi's ludicrous statement.

It was something I'd experienced myself, after all.

A bitter, yet delightful, experience.

However, from my shadow produced by the indirect lighting of the café, there was naturally not a single sound or movement.

"Even though someone like me never had any right to be treated kindly by you, Araragi-kun, or even anybody at all. Thinking about it, everyone must have been watching over me warmly until I

realized it myself. At that, I can only show remorse. No matter how much I repent and repent, it will never be enough."

"Just explain to me what's going on, please. You don't need to repent, just start from the top. If there's something I did, then I'll apologize. If it has something to do with Oikura, then—"

Or did it have something to do with Meniko? Had she found out that Meniko was calling me "Koyomi-chan" recently?

"It's me who should be apologizing, Araragi-kun. I'm truly sorry that I made you feel that way. I no longer have any ground to stand on. It would not be an exaggeration to say that my sinfulness knows no bounds."

Rather than not having any ground to stand on, I have nothing left to cling to.

As she continued to say such things, I realized that my assumption that she was throwing a curveball to indirectly express her discontent with my moving next door to Oikura was not just me reading too much into things, but rather me misreading her entirely… In the first place, she wasn't the kind of person that would express her emotions in such a bizarre way.

For better or for worse, she was completely straightforward.

Whether it had to do with entering university or rehabilitating herself, that part of her never changed—so, in this case, it was probably correct to think that she meant exactly what she said.

Hitagi was "seriously" apologizing to me.

And she was "seriously" trying to break up with me—there was no way that she'd visited some other shrine on the way here and was obeying the fortune slip that she drew. Like, "Love—break up with him" or something.

After drawing "huge luck", perhaps.

In fact, even the first time, when she broke up with me, she was not trying to fake me out or bargain with me. She had simply broken up with me without any exaggeration, and, as someone who had known her since she was in high school, I could only feel a sense of helplessness akin to fatigue or futility, knowing that anything I said was pointless—and I'm sure Kanbaru Suruga, who had known her since middle school, would also agree. Even so, it wasn't like I could just give up now.

Channeling the spirit of Kanbaru from her stalker era, I said, "Let's calm down for a bit, Hitagi," going from a New Year's mood to my serious mode.[28]

"You don't have to call me 'Hitagi' anymore. That's nothing but an expired name now. You can call me 'Senjougahara' without honorifics like you used to, or you can call me 'pig' without honorifics like you used to."

“I’ve never called you ‘pig’!”

Not to mention, there was something wrong with describing your real name of “Hitagi” as an “expired name”.

“Then, please call me ‘Iberian pig’ from now on.”

“Why are you suddenly so high-class?”

Considering she was keeping me from maintaining my serious mode by saying something amusing, it seemed Hitagi—or perhaps, Senjougahara—had not completely lost her mind, but in that case, I couldn’t let her avoid my questions.

If this kept going, she’d gradually wear me down until this reached its natural end.

That would be bad.

“No, Araragi-kun. You’re the one avoiding me—avoiding me for my own sake. You’re avoiding me as though you’re hugging me[29]. How grateful I am, for your kind character that could never be found elsewhere. I know that you understand everything, even if you’re pretending not to. But it’s fine. You don’t have to keep being nice to me anymore, after all this time. My meager character, which you have so carefully raised, has grown enough to understand that much. Just barely.”

“Uh-huh…”

Uh-huh.

She was saying that I understood everything, but I was perhaps the most clueless I’d ever been… If I were to simply go along with this, would I be ending up in the sorry state of breaking up with Senjougahara Hitagi without ever having understood her, not even the tiniest bit?

As I remained silent, the incomprehensible girl continued.

“Araragi-kun, if you were to be any kinder to me, then I’d become spoiled. I can’t be pampered by you forever. The new year has just begun, so I think we had better draw the line here. I have to set you free from being tied down to a blockhead like me. That’s the best favor I’m capable of giving you in return.”

“If you’re going to say that, then it would’ve been better if we never started the new year… I’d be fine with it being last year for the rest of my life.”

I wanted to go back in time.

Though I’d already done something like that before.

“Araragi-kun, I hereby release you to be with Oikura-san or Tsubasa-chan.”

“If those two are my only options, then I’d prefer Tsubasa-chan…”

However, seeing as Hanekawa Tsubasa’s current whereabouts and activities were completely unknown, making my release to her

effectively impossible, I was going to end up under Oikura at this rate. A hell that not even spring break could compare to.

A hell that not even actual hell could compare to.

"Ah, speaking of which, I have constantly been in the care of both Oikura-san and Tsubasa-chan, too… I had better apologize to them as well. Kanbaru… Well, Kanbaru's fine."

"Why is only Kanbaru fine?"

The spirit of my underclassman that I'm channeling is kicking up a fuss.

"Anyway, Araragi-kun. Go ahead and help other girls out. I'll be all right on my own, now. Totally fine. I'll live out this lonely and pathetic life by myself."

"There's no way anyone who says that will actually be okay on their own! Don't be pathetic. If you're going to be like that, I can't release you out into the world."

"Heheh."

At that, Hitagi chuckled.

It was not a scornful chuckle meant for an ex desperately clinging onto her after being cut off, but a laugh that seemed as though she was recalling a fond memory.

"How nostalgic. Even back then, Araragi-kun, you chased after me when I was trying to leave in solitude."

"Back then…? When?"

"Again, you're pretending not to remember. I was trying to be gone with the wind."

"Were you supposed to be Scarlett O'Senjougahara?"

"By the way, when you say 'gone', does that mean that you're already gone or that you're about to be gone?"[30]

"If you don't know that, how in the world did you get a recommendation for university?"

Since she was insisting on it, I couldn't say for sure, but… I didn't have any memory of her going like the wind.

Ah, but, there was one time.

One time when she went like a storm—perhaps?

"…Could you be talking about the very first time we met? The time I caught you after you fell from the stairs, and I figured out your secret—"

If that was the case, it was too far back to even be nostalgic, but there was no way I could forget. After all, that was the beginning of Araragi Koyomi and Senjougahara Hitagi… Our starting point. From that time in Class 1-3, Hitagi and I had been in the same class in high school for three years, but our story undoubtedly began on that day, at that time.

The beginning of our romance.

With that in mind, it was an anniversary that was far more precious and unforgettable to me than New Year's Day, but…

"How unpleasant,"

Hitagi said.

As though that anniversary was actually a day of mourning.

"If only it weren't for that day. Then I would have been able to continue my association with Araragi-kun with no shame whatsoever. No matter how much I repent and repent and repent and repent and repent and repent and repent, it won't make things better.

No matter how much I repent.

Like how, no matter how much I suffered from that disease, I never got better, she said.[31]

"No, hold on, why are you saying that? If it weren't for that day… If it weren't for that May 8th, we wouldn't be in a relationship like this right now…"

Although, we *were* in the middle of a breakup right now…

"Araragi-kun, please stop. How much longer are you going to remain so overprotective of me? I'm not a child anymore. I'm not just a little girl. I'm a grown woman."

Hitagi spoke as though she'd finally gotten fed up—rather than a grown woman, she sounded more like a spoiled brat, but she began to reluctantly confess to me, who was chasing after her like on that day.

"As someone who committed that unforgivable act of violence against you, Araragi-kun, I simply do not have the right to be your girlfriend. I should just be happy that I was able to have a good dream, if only for a moment. A fleeting dream."

"…Huh? What? If you mean…"

If she maybe, perhaps, possibly, meant *that*, then… Excuse me?

"Hitagi, if I'm misunderstanding, then I'd like for you to immediately correct me, but… Could you perhaps be apologizing for when you stapled my inner cheek on that day, at that time?"

"Could there be anything else?"

Sure enough, with an expression calmer than the one she had a year and eight months ago after the end of Golden Week, Senjougahara Hitagi nodded.

“Mutual consent is required in romantic relationships beyond just the ‘exchanging of vows’—although, the fact there are so many figures that don’t recognize that as true is what troubles everybody.

“‘Figures’, again?[32] Hilarious.

“It’s almost as funny as saying, ‘the esteemed populace’.[33]

“Victims, perpetrators.

“The masses.[34]

“It’s all so pretentious.[35]

“But a relationship can’t survive on just being funny or enjoyable—and though I mentioned mutual consent, I think it’s really interesting that you need the consent of both people when you start dating, but a breakup can occur with only a single side’s opinion.

“The reality is that vows can be unilaterally annulled.

“I suppose this is the difference between just dating and being married—people say that it’s easy to jump into a marriage without really thinking about it, but once it comes to divorce, it’s not so easy anymore.

“If one person wants to get a divorce but the other disagrees, it can become a considerable dispute—for example, the division of property or the matter of child custody—and in the worst-case scenario, the case will need to be handled by the courts.

“Judgment will be given according to the law.

“Even though no crime was committed, even though no one was in the wrong—they will still be dragged to court. It’s something unthinkable for an unmarried couple, to have to bring in an unrelated third party to arbitrate whether or not you will break up.

“Divorce by consent? More like a convoluted divorce.

“Like in shogi, one of them must resign.

“They have to end it.

“But it’s more like saying, ‘Sorry, I see no future with you,’ I suppose?

“There’s no referee—but it may be possible to run out of time.

“As a ‘person with experience’, I’d like to talk more about the breakdown of marital relations, but I’ll save it for next time—because while it’s still possible to sever the ties between a married couple, I wanted to dig deep into how difficult it is to do the same for the vertical case, the ties between parent and child.

“That also applies to the Araragi residence, that family of police officers, does it not?

“In the past, Araragi Koyomi had gotten all worked up about how he didn’t want to be considered his parents’ child, but in the end,

his parents were his parents, and he was their child.

"He was not allowed to avoid celebrating Mother's Day.

"Even for the Fire Sisters, he was their brother, and they were his sisters.

"There was no consent involved.

"The individual's desires did not matter.

"It can't be defied nor denied.

"Resistance is futile.

"You can choose your partner in marriage, but you can't choose your family.

"Along those lines, it may ultimately boil down to making that childish complaint of, 'I never asked for you to give birth to me!'—although, that was something I actually said once.

"Right.

"Naturally, I didn't apologize for it.

"I wonder if I feel guilty about not apologizing—perhaps, after all this time, it's fine to apologize for things that are too late to give an apology for."

“Ah, but even if I asked if there could be anything else, there are actually many other things. Uncountably, immeasurably many. Of my sins, my grave sins. Before I stapled your cheek, I put a box cutter of all things into your mouth, and not only that, I hurled verbal abuse at you. Araragi-kun, even though you were only showing concern for me, I said you were trash, scum, a living corpse that should be ashamed to be alive.”

“I think it’s my first time hearing that I’m a living corpse that should be ashamed to be alive, though…”

“See? I’m so sinful. I can’t be forgiven.”

My retorts had weakened, but Senjougahara Hitagi did not falter. As though a dam had burst, she continued to lay bare the “sins” she’d committed.

“That’s right, there was that time I abducted and confined you, wasn’t there? How awful of me. Even if you were to forgive me, Araragi-kun, I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself. The fact that Kanbaru turned into your stalker is essentially my fault. Even the fact that Sengoku-san started wanting to kill you is my fault, too. If you hadn’t started going out with me, then right now, you and that middle school girl that is nothing but cute could be living happy lives.”

After all this time, I couldn’t help but think that that “happy life” would be particularly happy for anyone involved. Putting aside the stapler, the box cutter, the verbal abuse, the abduction, and the confinement, it was clearly wrong for Hitagi to bear the burden of the case with Sengoku.

She had mistaken the facts.

If anything, she’d been the one to protect me…

“I even made you into an accessory after the fact for my sin of secretly obtaining a driver’s license during high school…”

“Huh? Even that?”

Anything goes, huh.

“After all, Araragi-kun, you were super angry at me, weren’t you? And yet I ignored and turned a deaf ear to such selfless advice, dragging you around all over the place… In a broad sense, that could also be considered abduction and confinement. It’s a repeated offense. I confined you in my car, restrained you with the seatbelt, and took you here and there…”

“……”

The possibility that she really was just messing with me flashed through my mind, but my girlfriend’s expression was the picture of seriousness. You could even say it had surpassed “serious” into

“grave”.

Although, I suppose she was no longer my girlfriend but my ex-girlfriend…[36] Hold on, I needed to calm down.

I needed to think.

But I was still a bit drunk on the New Year’s mood, so it was hard for me to face reality… It was true that I was still a bit giddy from receiving New Year’s money, and there was also the fact that Hitagi looked so captivating in her formal wear, so my thoughts were all jumbled up.

What was she saying?

Was she apologizing for all those past things, after all this time? She’d called them not just sins, but grave sins, but along those lines, this wasn’t just in the past, but the far past.

“After all, those were almost fifteen years ago, you know?”

“Fifteen years? Not a year and a half?”

“Ah… That’s right, it was a year and a half.”

Although, to be precise, it was a year and eight months… Regardless, they were all things that had long since passed, stories that had long since been over. I could only think, was there really any point in bringing those back up now?

“Even so, after we resolved the case with the crab, you properly apologized… What kind of a crab canon are you trying to turn this into?”

“It’s not so simple of a matter that it would be resolved just by apologizing. No, a verbal apology like that can’t even be considered an apology. Back then, Araragi-kun, you were simply caught up in the atmosphere and just pretended to forgive me.”

Even if she decided that all on her own.

She’d said something like, “Even if you were to forgive me, Araragi-kun, I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself,” but this was an episode from so long ago that the matter of forgiving or not forgiving hardly mattered.

What was this, crab *shumai*?

“Anyway, even that wound from the stapler was something that quickly healed because of my vampire constitution…”

“But the wound on your heart has yet to recover, right? When I was treating you like a bundle of papers to staple, did you think I didn’t notice your trembling hands?”

That was just me being awkward and trying to be cautious with my hands…

The way she was apologizing for even the minutest of details was almost frightening. I could almost say that I felt more at peace when I had constantly been the target of her verbal abuse.

Unable to find a way to improve the situation, I could only

keep my mouth shut, and then…

"With all the ways I've hurt you in minute detail, Araragi-kun, it's clear that a sinful person like me has no right to love you. A more innocent girl is appropriate for you. Like Oikura-san or Tsubasa-chan,"

Hitagi said.

"It's hard to say that those two are all that different from you in that respect…"

I couldn't say even White Hanekawa was all that innocent.

As for Oikura, she was still biting at me. Really.

Do you wanna see them? Her bite marks.

Incidentally, I was someone with a vampire's bite marks on my neck.

Not to mention I had often been bitten by that lost girl… I'd really been bitten a lot, huh.

"Now then, please be kind to that Oikura-san from now on. You don't have to worry about me anymore. I'll text Oikura-san and let her know, too."

"Please stop?"

She was saying something completely different from the first time we broke up… When I provided lodging to Oikura when she was in dire straits, she had seemed as though she would never forgive me, but where had the remarks from back then disappeared to?

Had she really matured? Into a grown woman.

Was that what it meant to be an adult?

"Go on to the first shrine visit with Oikura."

"Considering that girl lives in the first district of hell, I don't think she'd ever pray to a god…"

I happened to be living in that same district, but the situation had moved into a category where that wouldn't be enough… The one that had changed residences was not me, but her heart.

However, that change of heart was just too abnormal.

"You don't need to worry about me anymore."

The girl that had once been caught by a crab, Senjougahara Hitagi, as though wrapping everything up, as though cutting everything off, spoke those words.

"I am truly sorry for everything up until now. I, Senjougahara Hitagi, would like to express this apology from the bottom of my heart. Now, please find happiness with another girl."

“There happens to exist the technique of avoiding giving an actual apology by simply expressing a desire to apologize—looking back, it does seem as though humanity has honed their wisdom in order to figure out the best way to effectively apologize without actually apologizing.

“I’m impressed.

“We’ve taken steps to admit defeat without surrendering—the phrase, ‘I apologize if anyone was hurt,’ is a prime example with its questionable usage of the subjunctive mood.

“‘If’, they say.

“Perhaps my excuse of not apologizing because things wouldn’t be resolved with an apology wasn’t so bad after all… However, my mother, whom I’d ‘never asked to give birth to’, was not one to make use of such roundabout wording.

“She was the kind to apologize directly.

“Moreover, she was the kind to apologize relentlessly.

“She was stubborn.

“Even when told that she’d be forgiven, even when told that it was fine, even when told to stop apologizing. She wouldn’t be satisfied with just that, and would continue to hound the other party and keep apologizing—and, as a sickly young girl, I would have to endure apologies from my mother day and night.

“‘I’m sorry I couldn’t give birth to you as a healthy child,’ she’d say—and, under her constant nursing and caregiving, every apology she gave made me feel as though my poor health was being engraved into my mind and body.

“Those wounds hurt more than my illness.

“It was like I was being told that I was the bare minimum for a human, of poor health and culturally unrefined.

“So, one day, I couldn’t stand it any longer and said this in response—’Stop saying that.’

“‘I never asked for you to give birth to me as a healthy child’—yes, I agree with you. It was poorly conveyed. I’d lost my temper, so I can’t deny that my wording had become a bit rough—but I wonder if my mother had not heard the full sentence.

“She’d received that much of a shock.

“Was that the appropriate way to describe it? I’m not a mother myself, so I wouldn’t know… As a daughter, if I had to guess at her feelings, then it must have been completely unexpected for her to be condemned out of the blue after I’d silently endured her countless apologies regarding my illness.

“‘To think you’d condemn an apologetic person,’ she may have thought.

“It might be reading too much into it to say that she’d held those feelings of remorse to avoid being condemned… But that’s why she herself read too much into my unclear conveyance.

“Should I call it a victim complex? Or a perpetrator complex?

“It was unconscionable.[37]

“Dear me. To say the least, I would like to apologize ‘if’ my words invited any misunderstanding.

“Summing things up, she’d kept on apologizing as though she was trying to beat me to the punch, but my counterattack had ended up being surprisingly effective—after that, my mother stopped apologizing to me.

“As soon as she realized that I might get mad at her, she stopped apologizing.

“She gallantly kept up her nursing and caregiving as she’d always done, but since then, to this very day, she has never once apologized—the idea of, ‘I won’t apologize if it means I’ll be condemned’? Ah, yes, that does make it apparent that we share the same blood.

“‘I’ll apologize properly, so promise me you won’t get mad’—we’d even made an awful promise like that.”

In the end, well, a promise was a promise, so we did end up visiting the Kitashirahebi Shrine together, but, as if she'd sensed the strained atmosphere between us, the fifth-grader god did not cheerfully appear before us. And with that, our first date of the new year, and our first shrine visit since we started dating, came to an end in a languid manner—it was a pretty big deal that it managed to end at all, even languidly. I'd at the very least managed to delay the conclusion, but since I hadn't been able to get her to retract her statement on that day, it essentially meant that our breakup had been established.

Well, damn.

How did it get like this?

I'd been so flustered that day that I'd been unable to understand her—my ex-girlfriend's?—intentions, but to sum things up, I'd come to the tentative conclusion that the most realistic explanation was that she'd fallen out of love with me because of my constant concern for Oikura.

Or rather, there wasn't anything else it could be but that…

The fact that, instead of getting angry at me like the first time around, she tried to end our relationship by being the one to apologize… That didn't really seem like something I expected out of Senjougahara Hitagi, but when it came to breaking up, it was cruel to assume that people would do what was expected of them.

Expectations could be coercive.

Perhaps that was what was wrong with me, that I always wanted people, no matter whom, to be what I expected of them… On the other hand, if a girl who once wielded stationery were to show consideration towards the partner she was breaking up with, then she really couldn't be called a mere girl anymore.

It was very mature of her.

Though her stubbornness was still childish.

Of course, even if I wanted to sugarcoat it, I was still a young boy at heart who wanted to continue clinging to her. But for the time being, I'd managed to earn a cooling-off period, so I decided to retreat from the warfront momentarily—even if what waited for me was just a war of attrition.

I also thought that I needed to cool my head… I needed to consider this carefully. Instead of just taking her at her word about all those past things that were dragged back up, I needed to change my stance and show remorse for the things that I needed to show remorse for… I didn't think that I'd made any mistakes, but I couldn't take

Hitagi seriously about all the things she mentioned, either. At any rate, for something as private as this, I couldn't even ask my sisters' advice, and certainly not Oikura, so I'd been carrying this weight alone for the past few days—however.

However, after classes restarted and after I heard that anecdote from Meniko, my private love life situation ended up no longer being private. It was no longer a private matter of low priority. It was not simply an individual case that could not be commented on.

Rather than individuality, it had acquired generality.

Even a member of the general public could comment on it.

It was almost as shocking as thinking that I had a unique, original idea and then learning that there was actually a precedent—of course, the romantic troubles of Araragi Koyomi and the romantic troubles of Hamukai Meniko were hardly compared… The fact that I could sympathize with something between a soap opera and slapstick comedy could surely be attributed to the cocktail party effect.

Maybe I just wanted to believe that it would be all right, because there was a precedent.

Maybe it was just like, "Why are you feeling like this was destiny, all by yourself?"

Even if I felt an affinity with her, it was possible that after I recounted my experiences to Meniko, she'd go, "That's completely differeeent. Don't lump us together with a lame feeling like thaaat."

But even so, I couldn't turn a blind eye to the few points in common we had.

Even though we didn't consider ourselves victims, the other party considered themselves perpetrators, and they apologized excessively—and, completely ignoring how we felt, they'd repeat those extreme apologies, to the point of ruining their present relationship. They'd perpetuate a cycle of rebirth with their ruinous apologies.

Victims and perpetrators.

The front and the back—they weren't in harmony.

It was a distorted kind of asymmetry, like some bizarre object that looked like a triangle from the front but an X-mark from the back.

Of course, that Hawaiian-shirt guy had once told me, as well as Senjougahara Hitagi, that he "hated those who played the victim", but he also had this to say—don't blame anything and everything on oddities.

And so, to avoid having to defend my claims, and to prevent myself from falling into a distorted interpretation of the facts, I had to perform analysis on top of analysis… Was this really a normal situation?

Was it common for university students to run rampant?

According to one theory, it's said that a couple breaks up every twenty seconds somewhere in the world. And in that case, perhaps the fact that my troubles and Meniko's troubles coincided was not even worth considering as a problem—but if you take "one couple every twenty seconds" literally, then you could interpret it as meaning that there will never be two couples breaking up within twenty seconds. And in that case, there could be a hidden meaning behind the simultaneous nature of my and Meniko's troubles.

This was nothing but distorted, though.

I didn't know how it was for Meniko and Boyfie-kun, but at least in the case of me and Hitagi, it was true that our horizons had broadened much more than when we'd been in high school… Hitagi, in particular, was living in a women's dormitory that was full of international students, and she was steadily expanding her friendships with a wide variety of people of her age, so to be honest, it was not at all inevitable for her to remain tied down to me, who'd just happened to go to the same high school as her.

Putting it that way, you might say that it hadn't been inevitable for me to be the one that caught her when she fell down the stairs, but I couldn't help but be haunted by an inferiority complex ever since "that day"... As such, I'd always been vaguely imagining that, if I were to be dumped by my girlfriend, it would be for such a reason… The truth was that the complete opposite was happening now.

It was like Hitagi was apologizing because I caught her at that time… Like she was saying sorry for putting me on this collision course.

A collision course that led to a stapler, verbal abuse, abduction, and confinement… Well, strictly speaking, that was all true, and looking at it objectively, Senjougahara Hitagi back then had definitely been excessive. To the point that it made me want to combine excessive and extraordinary to make a clever pun.[38]

It may have been out of self-defense, but it was excessive self-defense.

Perhaps, then, it was natural to apologize excessively for excessive self-defense… But I expect most people would not accept an apology from someone who did those same things.

It was definitely rare to forgive someone who stapled your cheek—however, that was just from an objective standpoint.

Subjectively speaking, from my own personal thoughts on the matter, all those things from back then are things I would consider having long since passed. And just between us, I might even call them good memories.

After all, it was the beginning of our love.

But referring to the memory of getting my cheek stapled as a "good memory" made me seem like a pervert, so I'd kept my mouth closed[39] about it, but when she came and prostrated herself to apologize for it, I had no idea how to respond.

It was like my perversion would be brought to the forefront.

Without caring about inviting any weird misunderstandings, I would say that it felt like the "good memories" I'd finally made were being rudely insulted. Wasn't it basically the same as her saying that it would have been better if our love hadn't begun at all?

Not to mention, I'd assumed that those feelings were a shared sentiment, so when she suddenly went on the offensive with her apologies, I just couldn't shake off a feeling of discomfort. Whether you wanted to call that escaping from reality or avoiding responsibility.

It felt like the rug was pulled out from under me.

In that respect, I was probably in step with Meniko… Even though they were supposed to have mutually "made love", Boyfie-kun had become obsessed with the idea that he one-sidedly "night-crawled" upon her, overcome with incomprehensible feelings of guilt, or possibly even feelings of guilty pleasure… Well, taking into account Boyfie-kun's nuisance level with his tour of apologies made to everyone around him, Meniko was in much more of a concerning predicament than I was, so it was better to evaluate this fairly.

For now, I was still better off.

It was fortunate that, after entering university, I hadn't made a single friend that would spread such rumors.

…To digress from the topic for a moment, university gave off the impression of being easier to make friends there than in high school, but I would like to report that had absolutely not been the case for me.

I guess it did feel like, in high school, I was being pressured from all directions to "make friends" within the classroom, among my classmates—it's the usual, "All right, split off into pairs"—but in university, or at least in the mathematics department of Manase University which I attend, I didn't feel that pressure.

The air pressure was as low as on top of Mount Fuji.

It was close to the sensation of free fall.

Thinking about it, it was because I was receiving that pressure that I formed the counter-thesis of "I won't make friends, because my strength as a human would decrease", but now that I was placed in a situation where I would not have any difficulty with my studies, or perhaps living my life, even if I didn't make any friends, I was no longer an opposing force against the concept of community. I was just a guy with no friends.

I couldn't join a club, either, without any determination.

Oikura was on this side, too.

If I were to categorize everyone, then Hitagi and Meniko would be on the other side—that is, they would form pairs, or even groups, of their own accord even without needing to be told, "All right, split off into pairs."

I guess the final form of such a person would be Gaen-san. Yes, that person whose list of friends was too large to fit in a single address book that she needed to carry as many as five cell phones around.

As for which side was good or which side was better, that wasn't really the point of those categories, but now that my nature was exposed like this, I couldn't help but simply feel envious. Hitagi had told me, "I'm simply re-entering the world of human relations that I'd used my 'illness' as an excuse to skip out on," so she might hold a different opinion—even Kanbaru, who I considered the embodiment of communication ability, claimed to be extremely gloomy in the past.

I just didn't get it.

Be that as it may, it wasn't like I could rest easy because I didn't have any friends. Even if I didn't have any friends, I did have a childhood friend (though we were in the middle of cutting ties), and at the rate things were going, Hitagi might actually write a letter of introduction to Oikura for me.

I wished she would stop.

We were about to form a horrifying love triangle, an ugly development beyond what you would expect from a soap opera… When it came to Meniko, she shouldn't have any points of contact with Hitagi, so I could probably keep her out of it… In the same way Meniko had let me know about her circumstances in the form of asking for advice or giving me a quiz, perhaps it was better for me to go on ahead and let Meniko know about my circumstances. That is, if I could think of a good quiz.

But, you know.

I'd wanted to keep Meniko away from Senjougahara Hitagi from the beginning, but I especially wanted to keep her away from anything that was actually oddity-related… Though I had to put that on hold for now.

Turning to those that were off-campus, then Kanbaru Suruga was a concern—or rather, I'd had a complaint well up in my throat about how if she was going to apologize to me, then she should apologize to Kanbaru first. Why was only Kanbaru fine…? But that could be a very possible development and not just a joke. Assuming that this was something other than my girlfriend simply hating me.

A slight upside was that when it came to Hanekawa, whom Hitagi had lined up alongside Oikura as one of the candidates I would

be released to, our communication with her had stopped entirely, so I didn't have to worry that some strange apology would be sent to "Tsubasa-chan"—it wasn't exactly an upside that we'd lost communication with our benefactor who was overseas, but let's leave it at that for now.

What a relief.

At the very least, I didn't want to bother Hanekawa.

In any case, it would be pretty rough if a rumor that I was physically and mentally abused for over a year spread to one of our mutual acquaintances… I wouldn't necessarily say that I was thinking in the same way as Meniko was, but there was no doubt that an apology tour would be a nuisance to others. To others, and to me.

But even so, I couldn't exactly go around claiming that I didn't consider any of that abuse to be bad… Like how Meniko couldn't go around explaining to each of her clubs, "That's not iiit, we were actually making looove."

Especially if her feelings were already gone.

Unlike her, I was miserably clinging to my relationship, but anyway, I couldn't make any careless conclusions. If I compared my case with Meniko's case, then I could make any number of hypotheses, but a hypothesis was nothing more than a hypothesis.

I needed to establish a theory.

There was not a shred of physical evidence that this was an oddity phenomenon—of course, it was unusual for there to be an oddity phenomenon that came with physical evidence, but there was no doubt that my thought process was, at the moment, falling into an emotion-based vector.

There was that glimmer of hope that I might be able to restore my relationship with Hitagi, and even if I didn't wish for that, if I believed that I could ease my friend's worries even a little bit, it would be easy for me to lapse into forgetting that Hawaiian-shirt guy's teachings and blaming everything on oddities.

It was time to return to my lodgings, take a break, and then spend the night to go over the case one more time, or maybe two or three more times—after making that careful decision, I returned to my apartment that was within walking distance of the university, only to find my neighbor lying in wait.

My neighbor.

In other words, the girl who lived at such a close distance that soup would still stay warm, Oikura-san herself… Compared to that, our quarrels could stay heated for a far longer distance, but oh dear, was she sounding the gong of war?

"Araragi…"

Surely she hadn't come to borrow fire from the flames of hell—

or rather, borrow soy sauce from my kitchen. But after loitering for a bit, my childhood friend looked at me with her usual madness-filled gaze and then began her curse-like declarations.

"I'm sorry… I don't know why, but I feel extreme regret for everything I've done to you… For that class meeting in high school, for that study group in middle school, for my freeloading in elementary school, it's always been one hundred percent my responsibility and one hundred percent my fault… Araragi, you've done nothing wrong. Even after we entered university, you moved next door to me because you were thinking about me, and yet I treated you harshly. It's my fault that your life is a mess! I won't ever show myself before you again, so please forgive me! Oh god, oh god, oh god, I hate myself, with hate yet hate for hate to hate in hate at hate by hate of hate!"

"…Yeah, yeah."

It was an oddity phenomenon.

All right, let's settle this.

“Shall I talk about ill will?

“You can also call it malice—basically, it’s a question of whether or not you can apologize with, ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to do it’.

“An apology that you, Araragi Koyomi, might frequently make, perhaps?

“Hehehe.

“I like that you aren’t denying it.

“If the question is if a crime becomes less serious if you didn’t perform it on purpose, then yes, it does become less serious—it’s inevitable for the judge’s sentence to change based on whether it was intentional or an accident.

“The victim’s pain can change, too.

“Even if it’s the same traffic accident, the feelings of the person who was hit can change based on if the other party was abiding by the speed limit, if they were following the traffic lights, or if they had a child seat placed in the proper spot—in the case of traffic lights, if the other party was following them, that means the person themselves had ignored them, so it would be difficult for them to blame the other party.

“If you didn’t mean to do it, then what did you mean to do?—before she stopped apologizing, one of my mother’s stock phrases was, ‘I did it for your sake,’ and I did think that that wasn’t a lie, but I had to recognize that there’s room for reconsideration depending on the motive.

“I needed to recognize it.

“I had to forgive.

“‘I know I did something wrong, but I had no other choice.’ Because that sort of acrobatic way of apologizing exists, I can’t say this is a hard and fast rule, but when someone punches you maliciously, then of course the punch hurts, but the malicious intent can hurt as well.

“When you become a victim of fraud, the financial damages are bad enough, but the fact that you were ‘considered a sitting duck that was easy to deceive’ is especially painful—of course, that doesn’t mean it’s okay to hurt others as long as you don’t hold ill will. On the contrary, there are good men and women that hurt others without any malicious intent, but in terms of how easy it is to forgive them, there’s a world of difference.

“However, there are those that think, ‘It wasn’t on purpose, so I won’t apologize. Because if I apologize, then it will look like I did it

on purpose'—they probably don't do it on purpose, but the shadow of death that looms over that way of thinking[40] really is a bit hard to forgive."

The completely unprecedented and utterly bizarre phenomenon of Oikura apologizing to me, which would never happen even if heaven and earth were to flip over, had in fact happened. And, after having attained a level of certainty, my next action was to return to my parents' place—or, to be precise, my homeground. I'd already returned during New Year's, so ultimately this wasn't much different from when I'd been commuting via car (or so I contemplated during my homecoming[41]), but with things as they were, there was no time for me to take a break at my lodgings.

It was fine to settle down, but I couldn't sit back and relax.

Needless to say, there was the instinctive desire to get as far as possible, as fast as possible, from the strange and peculiar character of an apologetic Oikura Sodachi, but as soon as I understood the situation, I also realized, upon thinking about it for a bit, that the situation had gotten a little out of my control.

I didn't want to admit it, though…

I wasn't entirely retracting my previous statement, but even though I'd said, "Let's settle this," with a carefree mood, I couldn't exactly say this was within my field of expertise… I could almost hear someone say to me, "Do you even have a field of expertise to begin with?" but at the very least, I definitely had a field of inexpertise.

When it came to oddities that made mental attacks like this, there was never a case in which I behaved in a useful way… There was no place to exercise the immortal power of a vampire. Speaking from experience, even though vampires had attained perfection physically, the longer the life they lived, the weaker they were to mental attacks.

It wasn't like I could send the apologizing Oikura flying with the brute strength of a vampire… This was different from when I could face apparitions with a physical presence like the *bakeneko* or the monkey's paw or the snake god (not that I was all that useful against the *bakeneko* or the monkey's paw or the snake god, but let's put that aside for now).

If anything, it was closer to the situation where I faced the crab that had caught Senjougahara Hitagi… At this point, it was like we were returning to our starting point, or dragging back up the bygone days of the far past, and I was a bit fed up with it. But if this was following the same trend as Hitagi's case, then aha, that was probably it.

Oddities have their own appropriate reasons.

No matter how strange, no matter how odd they are, they

follow a certain logic—that's also why we shouldn't be blaming anything and everything on oddities. Even if some strange phenomenon occurs, it will be the fault of humans.

And so, I made a triumphant return to my homeground.

Well, it was less like I was returning home in glory and more like I was coming home with my tail between my legs, but fortunately, while I was kidding about the triumphant return, I wasn't merely running home to escape.

I was returning to seek assistance.

Maybe people could only be saved on their own, but that wasn't necessarily the case when it came to saving others—if anything, the more the merrier, or so was Araragi Koyomi's stance.

It was just that I couldn't gather that many people.

There was no hope for my popularity.

Since entering university, I would usually rely on Ononoki-chan for cases like these, but unfortunately, because she had overdone her support for me who she was just supposed to be surveilling (my bad), her actions were currently being restricted indefinitely. Well, even if it weren't for that, that muscle-obsessed *shikigami* tween girl was even more of a power-based character than a vampire was, so a weirdness like this was probably not her specialty either.

Plus, I wasn't looking to rely completely on a tween girl.

Speaking of specialty, in times like these I should be asking a specialist for help, but I'd unfortunately completely cut ties with everyone in that field, so that wasn't something I could rely on—hmm, even if she was just taking advantage of our friendship, was it still a mistake to break off the connection with Gaen-san?

That Hawaiian-shirt guy, who handled the case with Hitagi's crab, was probably off wandering somewhere… I didn't have the contact information of Ononoki-chan's master, Kagenui-san, but even if I did, that violent *onmyouji* was someone I didn't want to approach first, if possible.

Kaiki? Who the heck is that.

In the first place, if I wanted to rely on a specialist, I needed to be able to provide the appropriate level of compensation, so as a university student who didn't work a part-time job and lived purely off of an allowance, it was a difficult option for me to take—that appropriate level was beyond me. I'd already learned enough from having to bear a debt of five million yen. And that wasn't even from student loans.

However, that didn't necessarily mean that my path forward was blocked in every direction… You could say that from the very beginning, I'd already thought of a potential way to break out of this troublesome situation. That was why I was driving home in my

Volkswagen New Beetle, in order to face my inner self that I'd left behind. No, not my inner self—if we were two sides of the same coin, then it would be like my back side…

Yes.

Araragi Koyomi's back side—Oshino Ougi.

"Ka ka. Though you'd fought fiercely to graduate from that, it seems it's still following you around, that darkness. Don't you think so?"

When I looked over, in the passenger seat of the New Beetle, or more precisely, in the child seat that had been placed in the passenger seat of the New Beetle, a golden-haired young girl sat there reclined, as though enshrined—the former iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded former vampire, a different Oshino that had been one step ahead, Oshino Shinobu, had appeared.

No matter how regally she reclined, she was ultimately not on top of a throne but on top of a child seat, so that haughty and arrogant attitude actually made me feel relieved inside.

If even Shinobu had begun to start apologizing to me, my mental state probably wouldn't be able to take it—if she had said something like, "Sorry for sucking your blood on that spring break," I really would follow along with the trend of most vampires and kill myself. Even as a mere shadow of a vampire.

"Hmph. A useless concern. I have never once bowed my head to anyone. I am the King of Oddities, after all."

"I-is that so…? But, on that spring break, I feel like you said 'I'm sorry' a whole bunch of times to me before sucking my blood…"

"When I say it with my manner of speech, it would have been in the imperative form, like, 'Be sorry!' I might have even said, 'Say you are sorry.' 'Tis like how you can confuse 'bye' with 'by the way'.[42] Something like that could hardly be considered an apology."

"I feel like you also apologized a lot for destroying the world with a careless mistake…"

"That happened in another world. Whatever could you mean? I have no recollection of it."

Maybe she was just playing dumb, but when she used that manner of speech to say she didn't remember, it made it sound like she didn't remember because of her old age… Well, she was six hundred years old. But I didn't want to point it out and have her start fiddling with her brain like she did in the past… If anything, I wanted to keep the interior of my car clean.

I didn't even let her eat donuts inside.

"But my master, you sure are a cold man. How deplorable. If you were seeking help, you should clearly have looked to me, your partner for life, as the very first person."

Oh, sure.

Even though you didn't even show your face last time.

"I'm not good with this sort of thing, so neither are you, right? For a mental-based phenomenon like this. I was seriously worried that you might hold an apology press conference for me, you know?"

"Ka ka. A similar concern could be held for you, too. 'Tis not the time to be worried about me. Have you considered the possibility that, after naively returning to your hometown, you might suddenly be overcome with regret for everything you've done to the little girl, the tween girl, the young girl, and your two sisters?"

"What are you talking about? I don't know anything. You got any proof?"

"Rather than someone approaching old age, you just sound like a criminal. I sentence you to six hundred years in prison."

However, just as she'd pointed out, it was unclear how long I could stay cracking jokes like this. Thanks to Oikura, I'd become convinced that some sort of incident was occurring, but I had yet to grasp the source of the phenomenon. There was no guarantee that neither Shinobu nor I were safe from being captured by delusions of sinfulness—and with regards to our master-servant relationship, that was something that we'd both agreed on to never apologize to each other about, so if we were to be hit, it would be lethal.

The world could be destroyed again.

"In that case, what of that darkness girl you are planning to rely on? There's no guarantee that she will remain sane."

"Well, Ougi-chan was never sane in the first place."

"She might come apologizing to you. Saying, 'Sorry for being just a little bit meddlesome last year,' or something like that."

"That apology just sounds more like a New Year's greeting…"

I couldn't say that I wasn't concerned, but considering that I was still fine, I figured Ougi-chan was, as well… As long as Ougi-chan and I were two sides of the same coin.

Two sides of the same coin.

That's why I was turning to her for assistance… If there was anyone who was an expert on front and back sides, it was Oshino Ougi. And speaking of another world, when I'd gotten myself lost in the "Mirror World" some time ago, it was Oshino Ougi that had rescued me in the end.

"That lively, energetic, positive Oikura from back then was already bad enough, but this apologetic Oikura is seriously too hard to look at… If she doesn't regain her senses and start cursing me out, there would've been no point in me moving in next to her."

"As I have been saying for a while, you should be the one to apologize. To that generic girl."

“Don’t call Oikura generic. She’s not just some cheap knockoff of Hitagi.”

Unlike last time, not everything had been flipped over, and that was probably something I should keep an eye on… And by everything, I didn’t just mean everything in the world, but also everything on a personal level.

For both Senjougahara Hitagi and Oikura Sodachi, if you ignored the part where they were apologizing incessantly, you could say they were driving smoothly… It was just that they were traveling down the highway of apologies.

“Rather than highways, it’s more like they have the force of those German motorways. What was it called… *Bahnauto*?”

“‘Tis the *Autobahn*. *Bahnauto* would just be ‘burnout’.”

“I actually thought I would burn out, though. Without even leaving any charcoal behind. …Ah, but, speaking of the ‘Mirror World’, over there, you were ‘Princess Beauty’.”

“Hoho. Though I am still beautiful even now.”

Shinobu made to smooth down her blonde hair, all the while still in her child seat.

How lax of her, even though her seat belt was tight.

“‘Twas simply that the princess became a slave. I would not mind if you called me ‘Slave Beauty’ from now on. But what of it?”

“It was something I remembered when Hitagi brought up suicidal thoughts, but when you were ‘Princess Beauty’, you were so noble and virtuous that anyone who was in audience would be so overcome with an inferiority complex that they’d feel, ‘It’s inexcusable for me to be alive,’ right?”

As I’d mentioned before, I’d felt that it was better to not have Shinobu cooperate in dealing with this phenomenon, but now that she had already shown herself, that was something we probably needed to discuss… I believed that Hitagi’s suicidal thoughts were just rhetoric, but as someone who’d come close to ending his own life in front of “Princess Beauty” in that “Mirror World”, I wanted to prepare for the worst.

To put it like how the Boy Scouts would put it: “Be Prepared, For the Worst”.

“Are you trying to say that I am the culprit behind this case? Goodness, how dare you make such a false accusation? Very well, go ahead and arrest me. I shall be let go soon enough.”

“You’re the one sounding like a criminal. Like one of those upper-class criminals.”

Well, of course.

She wasn’t just upper-class, she was a princess.

And even a king.

“But, the time I spent as a princess was six hundred years ago, and that’s much too far back to remember clearly. Not to mention, ‘twas not an oddity phenomenon at all.”

“Really?”

“‘Twas a trait of mine from before I became a vampire, you see—and ‘twas for the sake of losing that trait that I became Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade—or maybe it was not…”

Her memory really was fuzzy.

But, now that she mentioned it… If I was being careless, I could easily mix this up with the vampire’s skill of “fascination” that Hanekawa had once told me about. But that “Sorry for being alive” thing might only *seem* like, but not actually be the same as, Hitagi’s and Oikura’s, and even Boyfie-kun’s, aggressive apologizing.

Or rather, it would be bad if they were the same.

“So you’re saying that that was not one of your traits as an oddity, but one of your skills as a human? In that case, I have a hypothesis. Basically, Meniko and I have become so charming and gracious as humans that we started affecting our surroundings…”

“Ha! Ha ha! Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

“Oh, the vampire way of laughing.”

Well, I nearly made myself laugh with what I’d just said… Hamukai Meniko might be a rather eccentric oddball, and she was pretty popular on top of that, but after bringing up the princess class, it was unreasonable to expect that level of charisma from her.

And as for me, it went without saying.

I didn’t even want to say it.

Charisma? More like early summer.[43]

“Early summer doesn’t exactly suit you, either. You’re more like midwinter.”

After laughing her heart out, she immediately retorted as soon as she caught her breath (what was this, a flash freeze?).

“Not even I can say for certain, but this doesn’t seem like the work of a living human, you and your friend included—as you’ve judged, ‘twould be appropriate to see this as the work of a non-living oddity. One that cannot be handled by brute force. …Of course, there still remains the possibility that a living human is making use of a non-living oddity,”

she continued.

While it was conditional, it seemed she was provisionally in favor of my independent actions—how reassuring. Well, there have been plenty of times when the two of us working together had ended up being a mistake, so I couldn’t lower my guard just yet.

“Then, do you have any ideas, not as ‘Princess Beauty’ but as the ‘King of Oddities’? Is there an oddity that can operate mentally

like this?”

“Well, I was never a gourmet. They may have been sources of energy, but I was never too knowledgeable on the variations of oddities. I can only roughly classify them based on the nutrients they give.”[44]

“But you told me about the *kakoi-hibachi* back then.”

That was an oddity that affected the body—I think? Or was that more like the placebo effect, and it was an oddity that affected the mind?—so the foundation of it was basically like a scam.

“That was just me parroting what that Hawaiian-shirt brat told me. You know, a girl outside the temple gate.[45] Like how I am bound to your shadow now, it was when I was bound to the ruins of that cram school that I received that lecture.”

“Ah, that’s right. Kujaku-chan’s case was also from hearsay, wasn’t it.”

“I have pretty much forgotten all that, too. Right now, when you suddenly said something incomprehensible like the *kakoi-hibachi*, you left me extremely dumbfounded.”

What an unreliable memory… At this rate, she might actually have forgotten all about what happened with Shishirui Seishirou, too.

You really shouldn’t live that long a life.

Though I wanted to live one.

However, putting aside the teachings of that Hawaiian-shirt guy, there were lots of things that you needed to forget in order to continue living… Like crimes, or sins.

Receiving harm and causing harm.

Even if the perpetrator forgets, the victim won’t forget—I guess it was like, the person who forgets will forget, but the person who is forgotten won’t forget? In that case, I suppose I had no choice but to place my expectations on the niece of that “Hawaiian-shirt brat” Oshino Meme, also known as Oshino Ougi… She herself was certainly not an authority on oddities, but this was clearly in her genre.

You might even say it was her favorite dish—after all, Oshino Ougi was an underclassman that enjoyed putting psychological pressure on me.

Mental attacks were her forte.

“……”

I had never seriously doubted Shinobu, who was once “Princess Beauty”, but as a matter of fact, wasn’t it pretty possible for Ougi-chan to be the mastermind behind this incident?

If that was true, then me driving my car back home was more like a moth flying into a flame, but the present situation was such that I had no other option I could take. Although we’d more or less settled things before my graduation, I still needed to take all possible

precautions, lest she take revenge against me.

Well, that basically meant I couldn't be too patronizing to my old junior—I had to steel myself for when we finally met.

"Still… It'll be pretty difficult to meet with Ougi-chan just by going back home. Even starting from where she lives, it's a complete mystery."

Ougi-chan was presently a second-year at Naoetsu High, so perhaps a simple visit to my alma mater would suffice, but as an alumnus whose memories of his high school life weren't particularly pleasant, I honestly did not want to go back there if possible.

Otherwise, I hadn't really thought about it, so what to do? With a phenomenon exceeding my comprehension currently occurring, it was true that it wasn't exactly the time to be acting selfish…

So, if there was no other option, I wasn't against taking that route, but before that, I could still make all the moves that I could make—after all, I couldn't overlook the fact that the current Oshino Ougi, who I'd described as my back side, was also involved with yet another junior of mine: Naoetsu High's superstar and the ace of the basketball club, Kanbaru Suruga. She had gotten close to that girl that had once prayed to a monkey, and, well, was being just a little bit meddlesome.

Basically, the correct move was to enter the address of Kanbaru's house into my navigation—thinking about it, the last time I'd met Ougi-chan was outside the gate of Kanbaru's house, so, while I was at it, maybe I'd go and clean up my cute junior's room for the first time in a while.

“However—if such a thing is easier to forgive, then even if you did something intentionally and with malice, it’s much more cost-effective to apologize as though it was an accident.

“You could say it was logical.

“You could say it was legal.

“The best option may be to act as though you were wishing for the best.

“Now, you may be thinking, isn’t that just lying? But consider this: wouldn’t the victim receiving the apology prefer that I’d done what I did unintentionally, instead of hearing my honest confession? —rather than knowing that I’m a person of principle, wouldn’t they prefer to think that they weren’t a victim?

“I would.

“Let’s think in a victim-centered way.

“‘I didn’t mean to do it, and this may sound hard to believe, but it really was just a series of bad coincidences’—if someone told you that, it might sound like more of a relief than if they ostentatiously admitted to their wrongdoings.

“Like how people want to think, ‘I’m not at fault, I haven’t done anything wrong,’ you might also want to place themselves in a world view of, ‘No one is at fault, no one has done anything wrong’—you might still suspect that they’re telling a small lie, but not pointing it out and feigning ignorance to forgive them is the secret to success.

“A mistake that wasn’t anybody’s fault.

“There were no bad guys.

“In a sense, it would even be better for the one getting mad if, instead of having to listen at length to tedious excuses, they were quickly offered a reasonable pretext for compromise. So it’s by no means a misdeed to tell a lie for the sake of reaching that compromise.

“Or so I would like to say, but it would depend on the situation. If an obvious lie were to be found out, then it would just end up being nothing but disgraceful self-justification, incurring an even worse wrath from the wronged party—and if you were to go and say, ‘I told an easy-to-forgive lie for your sake,’ it would just have the opposite effect.

“Rather than victim-centered, it was just self-centered.

“So, considering the risks involved, it may not be the only option, but it was still a smart option to honestly apologize from the beginning, without trying to get away with it—not that I would recommend this option.

“It also depends on what the purpose of your apology is.

“Is it to make the other person feel better?

“Is it to make yourself feel better?

“Or is it to torment the other person?—I’ve certainly seen cases where apologies were piled up to that effect.

“By piling up apologies, they piled up their sins.[46]

“Piling and piling, over and over again.”

“Oh! If it isn’t Araragi-paisen! Whoa, long time no see! You’re as handsome a man as ever, and I almost thought you were a bird of paradise! Didja come all the way here just to see me? C’mon in, make yourself at home, and let’s have a chat!”

Before anything else, I would like to say that those were absolutely not the words of my cute junior, Kanbaru Suruga, nor were they the words of my cute alter ego, Oshino Ougi.

After parking my New Beetle at my parents’ home and fooling around with my sisters for a bit, I had made my way on foot to the Kanbaru residence, but when I approached the entrance of that huge Japanese-style mansion (incidentally, Shinobu had returned to my shadow—she hated dealing with Kanbaru), who could there be to greet me but Higasa Hoshiame?

No, but, really, who are you?

You’ve kept showing up since Monster Season started, but it’s not like you’ve become popular or anything. You have zero influence right now.

“Now, now, being less popular lets me do whatever I want, right? Sheesh, I agreed to watch the house for Ruga way too easily, and I thought I would die from boredom, so I’m totes excited that I suddenly got to see Araragi-paisen.”

In the short time since I’d last seen her, she’d become a *gyaru*.

She never said stuff like “totes” before.[47]

She should’ve been pretty sporty, as a basketball club member… Ah, but she’d retired a while ago, and she was only poking her nose into their affairs because of various complications, wasn’t she.

Maybe once all that came to an end, she’d lost heart… Or rather than losing heart, she’d let loose.[48]

But she’s taking college entrance exams, isn’t she?

It’s already the new year, so wouldn’t it be getting into full swing soon?

“Ah, wait, were you one of those characters that are surprisingly smart? Higasa-chan.”

“Uh, no? Not at all. If anything, I’m an idiot.”

That actually made her seem more reliable, weirdly enough.

As if she’d somehow prove the *abc* conjecture using completely unexpected reasoning.

“Weeelll, y’see, it was time for the final push, but I pushed a little too hard. It’s like my heart broke with a snap. I totes skipped out on all the open campus tours. I closed off my heart to those open

campuses."

That was a pretty clever thing to say, but was this really the time?

An open campus… My university had one of those too.

"Um, so where's Kanbaru? If you're left watching the house… Is she on a family vacation or something? Is high school still on winter break?"

"Nah, Ruga is out somewhere with Ougi-kun like always. Something about mummies and memorializing the dead? And then there was something about her grandparents needing to stay at the main house during the New Year's period?"

"The main house?"

With this being such an impressive mansion, it gave off the impression of being the main house, but to think there was another house at the root… As for why their grandchild, Kanbaru, didn't join them on that "family vacation", it would be because she was born after the elopement of their would-be successor, Kanbaru's father… The family matters of others could be pretty complex.

It made me think mine were simple.

"Anyway, I figured Ruga would be lonely on her own, so I stuck around and had her lend me a study room. Well, I'm the type to think that I can always study once I become an adult, so I'm really just lounging around watching TV."

She was really feeling at home, as though this was actually her own home.

What an open-minded junior.

She might even feel at home at my parents' place, this girl… This is something I thought about during my university life, too, but the world really is full of many kinds of people. If only I'd realized that when I was in high school. It felt like I'd lost out for over two of those three years.

"Now then, I dunno what you want from Ruga, but c'mon in, Araragi-paisen. That superstar should be back soon, but in the meantime, why not spend some time with this asteroid? There should still be some of my homemade blueberry-banana-peach-melon muffins left!"

"Isn't there more fruit than dough in those muffins?"

If that was supposed to be some sort of MacGuffin, then it was a very unpleasant foreshadowing… But anyway, I really needed to get into the habit of making appointments.

It was because I kept relying on chance meetings and inevitable meetings that I got stuck in an encounter with this semi-regular—but oh well. Right now, Ougi-chan's priority was Kanbaru, not me.

While sensing the end of an era where Ougi-chan meddled solely in my affairs, Araragi Koyomi, invited by a high-school-girl-turned-*gyaru*, stepped into the familiar sight of someone else's home.

Just from that description, what I was doing made me seem like a criminal—but let me just say that I wasn't just letting this all happen without serious thought.

They say, "Once you part with a gentleman for three days, you should view him with new eyes,"[49] but for the few months I'd been away from my hometown, Higasa-chan had (from the stress of entrance exams?) turned into a *gyaru*—but even so, she didn't extend any apologies to me.

In the first place, Higasa-chan had never done anything to me worth apologizing for, but in that sense, both Hitagi and Oikura hadn't done anything either—it seemed that the evil clutches of this weird apology fad had not, at the very least, reached my hometown.

However, it might be premature to judge just from a short talk at the entrance. I needed to investigate a bit more… It's what specialists would call fieldwork.

You could also call it survey sampling.

Something that could only be done through random encounters—in fact, I'd already been conducting this analysis when I dropped by my parents' place and talked to my sisters.

I hadn't just fooled around.

I'd had a proper reason for fooling around with my sisters. It was necessary.

I'd cross-examined my two sisters, Karen and Tsukihi, asking, "Don't you have anything to apologize for?" But they showed no resistance, much like pushing aside a curtain or putting a nail into rice bran,[50] and it seemed neither of them could think of anything.

If anything, putting rusty nails into a bed of rice bran is apparently a correct way to do things, so likening that expression to "pushing aside a curtain" might be a bit strange semantically, or so Meniko might point out… But anyway, it ended with just fooling around.

I fooled around to make up for all the time I'd been away from my parents' house.

"You should be the one to apologize, my master. For fooling around with your sisters even after becoming a university student."

"I won't apologize. In fact, I should be praised for this. If this were my golden age, I could have filled a hundred pages by just fooling around with my sisters."

"What a disgusting golden age. 'Tis more like a mating period."

Well, it was less that I restrained myself and more that it felt like it would get cut due to the social standards of the Reiwa era, but

anyway, there may or may not have been that sort of conversation with Shinobu.

At any rate, Karen was one thing, but if Tsukihi were to do something like apologize to me, I'd probably die from shock in spite of my vampiric immortality and finally welcome the end of the Monogatari series which you have all been such avid readers of (she was someone that would never apologize, even more so than Oikura or Shinobu—she could easily fly into a rage if she were ordered to apologize… I had faith in that), but now that I'd confirmed that there was nothing wrong with Higasa-chan, it was approximately fine to approximately conclude that my hometown could approximately be considered a safe zone.

Three layers of approximation.

Turning that around, it meant that Manase University was in dangerous waters.

For now, the oddity phenomenon was restricted to the university campus—Boyfie-kun and Hitagi and Oikura were all Manase University's students. Although, since there were also students that weren't affected, like me and Meniko, it was just a hypothesis… Were we just exceptions?

Conferring with Higasa-chan was really just an unexpected survey sampling, but it ended up being an extremely important line of inquiry. If my hometown was considered a safe zone, then the suspicion on Ougi-chan was almost certainly cleared.

It would almost certainly be ostentatious.[51]

It might be being overly self-conscious to assume that Ougi-chan, who was currently clinging to Kanbaru, would want to bother with me, who'd been so far apart from her… Thinking about that gave way to apprehensions that she might not even cooperate with me.

Well, I could think about that later.

First off, Higasa-chan. Time to demonstrate my investigation techniques to expose every nook and cranny of the mentality of this girl, whose course had shifted from athlete to *gyaru*.

I'll strip you down and lay you bare.

…In terms of the social standards of the Reiwa era, I'm guessing that phrase is no good?

"Now, make yourself at home. I'll make some space for you to sit down. Sorry about that, our Ruga has made such a mess of her room."

"…Isn't about half of this mess yours, Higasa-chan? I can see the pieces of a brand new reference book and a newly-purchased dictionary that were mercilessly torn apart."

The reference book was one thing, but could a dictionary even be torn apart?

Even without a monkey's paw?

"Heheheh. I've made good use of the strength I've trained up playing basketball."

"Train your mind instead, missy."

Regardless of who caused the mess, in the few months since I'd last visited, Kanbaru's room had become a near-indescribable chaos.

It could be fine to say that the amount of trash you would find in a hoarder's house was instead crammed into a single room, or was that not fine at all? Though it was a Japanese-style room, not a single *tatami* mat could be seen, and even the sliding screen and the pillars were only just barely visible near the ceiling. Even though I'd told her time and time again, throw out the trash, get rid of things you don't need, and put things back in their proper places—I'd even given her a broom and a dustpan as a present when I left for university, but it seemed my sentiment as her senior hadn't reached her at all. That broom and dustpan must have become buried in this room somewhere.

"Out of Doraemon's secret gadgets, I used to want the Take-copter the most, but nowadays, I want the Memory Bread."

"Ever since I was a child, I've always wanted the Devil Passport."

"You're exuding nothing but evil, Araragi-paisen. Even a child that says they want the Earth Destruction Bomb would seem more wholesome."

This Araragi-paisen who exuded nothing but evil had begun to clean up as if it was natural, but that was just something I was doing on the side—I needed to finish up my interview with Higasa-chan before Kanbaru and Ougi-chan returned.

"Y'want anything to drink with those muffins, Araragi-paisen? There might be a half-drunk water bottle somewhere around here. Whew, Ruga's room is a real gold mine!"

"At least Kanbaru still recognizes this garbage as garbage… Your degradation knows no bounds. It's hard to see your athletic discipline become so ruined—"

It was meant to be just an honest and sad thought, but it wasn't a bad starting point for this interview, so I continued by asking this.

"—Don't you feel sorry or anything? For this mess. Towards me."

"Why would I feel sorry for the mess that my little girl caused?"

Higasa-chan made a puzzled expression as she threw herself on top of the bed of trash—here, "bed of trash" was not a metaphor, as the bed had been propped up at an angle as though it were trash itself.

“But Mommy feels a little bad about it. I guess.”

Aah, that reminded me of when Karen once went off the rails —or rather, she’d stirred up some trouble when entering middle school.

But then, after getting scolded by our mother, Karen-chan was rehabilitated.

Rather than being scolded, she really just got a good smack… If Karen were to go and apologize now for back then, well, it might be heartwarming.

She probably did feel sorry about it.

But if our mother were to apologize for her violence against her daughter, would it be as heartwarming? Karen probably didn’t even care about that, and if anything, she might even be grateful for being hit—if she were to suddenly be told that it was a mistake to hit her, how would that single-minded sister of mine feel?

For the generation of people raised in a spartan manner, undergoing harsh discipline and even corporal punishment, it would be hard for them to simply accept the claim that “It was all just tough love—if it weren’t for that strictness, you wouldn’t be what you are now”... Naoetsu High’s girls’ basketball club had been carrying that sort of bomb (a Club Destruction Bomb), and once they’d left the superstar’s era, it blew up on them.

“...How’s the girlsbas been since then? Has any of the trouble that’s died down come back up again?”

“Ruga and I have been keeping our eyes on them, but things’ve been fine so far. It’s more like our juniors are worrying about us now. Hm, I guess I feel bad about that, too. Like, sorry I’m showing you this side of me at the very end.”

Hmm.

Well, for now it seemed like a normal level of regretfulness. This wasn’t the same as the retorts I would often get from Shinobu, but I did want to tell her to formally apologize…

“Right now, my juniors have become super scared of entrance exams. They’re trembling in fear, wondering how awful these cram sessions could be to drive their former captain this far.”

“If you want, I can help you study. If it’s math and science, I can tutor you a little bit.”

“Ooh, what an attractive study plan. To be attended to by Araragi-paisen himself. Ruga will be jealous.”

“And how’s Ruga herself doing?”

We’d digressed a little from the main topic, but I was concerned about her roaming around with Ougi-chan at such a crucial stage. Considering I’d been playing around with a snake god around this time last year, it was pretty precarious for her to be receiving

concern from me.

"She's the kind of girl that can pull her weight when it counts. A friend I can take pride in. She got into Naoetsu High with hard work and determination, after all, so she's really on another level from us normal people."

Higasa-chan was being pretty apathetic…

Had I been like this when I was at my low point in life?

She'd even included me in her "us normal people" as if it were natural, so that may be true… But I suppose this could be one of the cute things about my hometown. Her knowledge of *gyaru* was just based on stereotypes, so, like me, there was a limit of sorts to how far she could act like she'd gone bad.

It was a town where middle school students tried being heroes of justice… Though they were then preyed upon by con men.

"There are a bunch of people like me in the dropout class. We're not rare at all. Besiiides, they're just some dumb entrance exams, right? I'm gonna go and play some street basketball with some rascally elementary school kids soon."

"Hold on, a third-year in high school shouldn't be playing with elementary school kids…"

Wait, that's just me, isn't it.

I guess we really weren't that rare.

But to get back on track, while Higasa-chan may have made various changes to her appearance, she wasn't really showing the sort of change seen in Boyfie-kun or Hitagi or Oikura. After running into a series of cases with no symptoms, it did make me wonder if maybe I was mistaken about all this after all.

My confidence wavered. What I'd heard regarding Boyfie-kun was ultimately just hearsay, and when it came to Hitagi and Oikura's eccentricity, couldn't it be said that they were as eccentric as always?

"But y'know, Araragi-paisen. Is apologizing, like, a fad these days?"

"A fad… Well, It's not a fad for me."

Perhaps she'd caught onto my attempt at information gathering, as the pseudo-*gyaru* countered with a question of her own. Uh-oh, I had to come up with a good excuse… I couldn't involve an innocent citizen in my battles.

Though the audience was already getting plenty involved, I said,

"I'm writing a report on this subject in university. In my course in criminal psychology, we're learning about apologies made by perpetrators to their victims,"

throwing out what I thought was a pretty clever excuse.

"Huh. Is that so. They do some pretty difficult things in

university, don't they? Gives me a headache just thinking about it. I'm glad I gave up on exams."

"It's too early to give up, Higasa-chan!"

"I thought for sure, Araragi-paisen, that you'd suddenly received apologies in quick succession from two people close to you who you thought would never apologize, and you were so confused that you started to look for a wide range of opinions."

That's way too sharp of you.

You should take those entrance exams seriously.

What a waste.

Considering I set my sights on going to university for a reason like "Because I want to take the same path as my girlfriend," it was hard to just ignore this junior of mine, who was missing out on her chance for education.

But, as sharp as she was, even Higasa-chan couldn't intuit the case of Meniko's Boyfie-kun, seeing as I had never mentioned Meniko, let alone introduced her.

If she'd been capable of doing that, she'd be Gaen-san. The "onee-san that knew everything", Gaen-paisen.

"Yep yep, but I totes get it. If an apology goes too far, it's like violence."

"Huh? Apologizing is violence?"

I felt like I heard that somewhere.

That's right, Meniko had said something like that.

"Right? Even if you're completely in the right, if the other person bows their head and kneels in front of you, you can't help but feel like you're the bad guy. It's not unreasonable, but it is uncomfortable."

Ah, I see.

It was like the front and back of causing and receiving harm were further overturned. Or, through the harm of "making someone apologize excessively", the victim was made into a perpetrator—a complex arrangement.

It was similar to how you could invent a victim by apologizing.

Perhaps if you're getting harshly reprimanded, a skillful way to get them to stop might be to start excessively apologizing to them—like how the best defense is a good offense.

"But if you ask me, winning like that just sounds like a Cadmean victory."

"A make-or-break victory?[52] Well, maybe. Speaking of which, when my sister prostrated herself to me, I thought the same thing. That this kneeling was violence."

"Araragi-paisen, you made your sister prostrate herself to you…?"

“Ah! See that? It’s just like we talked about, now I look like the bad guy!”

I wanted to assert that I didn’t make her do it, it was her that did it to me… Incidentally, after she prostrated herself, the most famous scene in the Monogatari series unfolds in the following passage, so please refer to it… If anything, she was prostrating herself not as an apology but as an entreaty.

An entreaty to introduce her to the superstar she admired… Since I was currently in the house of that Kanbaru-sensei, I found myself remembering it all.

“Speaking of which, when I prostrated myself to that golden-haired young girl, that was also an entreaty… That was something I did proactively.”

“Rather than apologies, is prostrating yourself a fad for you, Araragi-paisen?”

The *gyaru* was recoiling in disgust, but I had nothing I could say in response. I felt like I was being censured for my past wrongdoings—maybe I’ll prostrate myself and apologize.

That probably wouldn’t make for a funny joke right now.

Because that would just make what she said true.

“But, if apologizing is violence, then the act of forgiving—like, ‘You should be glad that I’m forgiving you’—that’s almost like asserting dominance, too, isn’t it?”

“In the past, when I got a lot of complaints from the girlsbas, I did my fair share of lecturing the juniors and giving ‘em a good smack—ah, those were good times. But there were plenty of girls that readily apologized without particularly reflecting on their actions. And I thought that was fine, too.”

“You thought it was fine? Even if they didn’t reflect on their actions?”

“An apology is a ritual, y’see. The idea is that if you can keep up formality, you can also keep up appearances. Even if you’re not sincere, if you can at least appear sincere, then I can understand. I can sheathe the sword.”[53]

It’s similar to how, when you’ve lost a basketball game, no matter how much your blood may be boiling, you’ll still say “TY” to the other team in the center of the court—said Higasa-chan.

“That’s an abbreviation for ‘thank you’.[54] Ahaha, you sometimes see that idea in movies of ‘Instead of saying sorry, you should say thank you,’ but in real life, it’s more like, ‘Whatever, just give them a proper apology.’”

Mhm… Realistically speaking, the idea that apologizing was violence was a bit irrational, but the idea that apologizing was a ritual made for a good point that I could include in my fictional report. Like

how establishing a peace treaty after a war marked the end of the conflict.

While Boyfie-kun's, Hitagi's, and Oikura's aggressive apologizing seemed like they were admitting a kind of defeat, they weren't trying to establish a treaty… It was more like they were prepared to fight to the end. The end of others, and the end of themselves… It might be a bit too grandiose to actually describe apologies as rituals, but at the very least, they were ignoring the etiquette that came with apologizing.

They were completely self-obsessed.

No matter how stereotypical it may seem, bringing a box of sweets in apology held that sort of meaning. And even in those apology press conferences, despite it not being clear whom the apology was meant for, it still held a societal significance, like a purification ceremony of sorts. Even if they didn't actually feel sorry, as long as they put on the pretense of feeling sorry, it would certainly not be abnormal if the apology relieved some pent-up anger.

"There's prostrating yourself and there's shaving your head, but it really would be abnormal if someone went and committed *seppuku* in apology. Maybe it's like, the more irrational something is, the more likely it is to be judged as sincere? I guess there were actually cases where the people demanding the apology were actually calling for it, so Japan can be pretty scary. Teehee."

"'Teehee'? That ain't funny."

No, I really couldn't laugh at that.

If the final destination of apologizing was committing *seppuku*, or some other form of suicidal act, then that could actually be where the current problem led to… Like the tale of "Princess Beauty".

Even though committing *seppuku* had its own form of etiquette…

"If you can't observe the proper etiquette of an apology, then you'll just end up as some obnoxious person. Of course, you could say that because there are people that actually demand excessive apologies like *seppuku* or putting your severed head on display, there are people that actually perform those excessive apologies."

"Is putting your severed head on display an apology…?"

I suppose, for the sake of atoning for your sins, that was the only thing you could do after killing yourself… Speaking of which, the story behind *seppuku* was that it was for the sake of protecting a samurai's honor.

"If you were to see a chicken running with its head cut off, your anger would cool down, wouldn't it?"

"It wouldn't just be a matter of my anger cooling down…"

Rather, it would make my blood run cold.

"The mechanism of being made into the bad guy, or the mechanism of making it seem as though you demanded that excessive apology from them… Rather than mending your relationship, it'll just make things worse. I had to mediate those sorts of problems pretty often, but I usually told them to just keep things light."

"That's right. Between me and that golden-haired young girl, we keep things light."

"Isn't that actually a bit heavy? Araragi-paisen, you always try to turn me off every now and then, but I'm not gonna be turned off. I've been talking about episodes with my juniors up until now, but whenever I have a fight with Ruga, who's on equal footing with me, then we'll always settle things gently. Or at least, I will."

"What about Ruga?"

"Well, being the kind of person she is, she'll always straight-up apologize without reservation. She's sure that her worth won't decrease by apologizing, so she's pretty strong, huh? She's someone that grows every time she apologizes."

The truth was that, like when she made a wish to that monkey, and like the way she's being haunted by Ougi-chan right now, Kanbaru's mentality could be subject to wide fluctuations, but there was no doubt that she was much more refreshing about these things than I was—even if she did something wrong, she wasn't the type to keep brooding over it after apologizing once.

Though she could be kind of a clingy stalker.

"Of course, when I apologize, I'll also give a clean apology. Don't get me wrong on that. When I was always borrowing Ruga's basketball shoes, I immediately got on my knees to apologize when she came to me about it."

"Sounds like you just didn't want to return them…"

"But, I still haven't apologized for taking Ruga's things and selling them off to her unofficial fan club, 'Kanbaru Soeurs', for some cash."

"That's awful! If you don't apologize for that, it'll definitely form cracks in your friendship."

"It's a bit complex, so cracks might form if I *did* apologize. Since apologizing means admitting to my wrongdoing. On the other hand, if I don't apologize, then I never did anything wrong."

What a crazy paradox. Or maybe it was just contrarianism.

But, putting ethics aside, pretending the quarrel never happened, or pretending the wrongdoing was never committed, without ever actually reaching an agreement—that might be valid in its own way, or so I thought. "You haven't done anything to apologize for" and "You haven't done anything for me to forgive you for" may be broad-minded statements, but really, they might just be gentle

ways to avert one's eyes from the problem at hand.

Like, "I'll pretend I didn't hear that."

Shinobu and I were like that, although I didn't want to admit it…

"I've known Ruga for so long that I'm afraid that, if I apologize poorly, she might relate it to some other things I've been responsible for and get mad at me for those, too. She'll say something like, 'I may as well bring this up while we're at it,' but it's like, that has nothing to do with anything right now! There's the risk that she'll take the chance to unleash all of her pent-up frustrations that I can't just settle with an apology, so it's dangerous to apologize carelessly."

I see.

And it wasn't easy to say that you only admitted fault for that one thing, either… It could just create an opportunity for all the other complaints to spout out. It could be the beginning of a war.

"In that sense, there's balance to apologizing. Asymmetry… There are cases where, even if the perpetrator wants to apologize, the victim won't let them apologize, too… It's like how I always hear, 'You don't have to apologize, just do better next time.' From my sister."

"From your sister, huh?"

Obviously, it was from Tsukihi.

Since I was an idiot, I simply rejoiced by thinking, "All right! I don't have to apologize!" But thinking about it, by not giving the perpetrator the chance to apologize, it was like not giving them the chance to be rehabilitated, or like telling them to continue being aware of their wrongdoing. In that way, it was like a punishment.

If Hitagi had always been bothered by me letting her off lightly when she apologized for stapling my cheek, then I wouldn't know what to say…

"Now then, Higasa-chan."

As we continued, I'd been able to ascertain that I'd need to put some real effort in order to get this room cleaned up, so I started to wrap up my investigation—I wouldn't be able to finish this cleanup in my spare time.[55]

"For the sake of argument, just like you said, if someone who I thought would never apologize suddenly came and apologized to me…"

"That doesn't really have to be for the sake of argument, though… But anyway, eat these muffins already. I'd love it if you could sink your teeth into our homemade sweets."

"Eh? These lumps were supposed to be muffins?"

Oops. I'd nearly cleaned them up.

I thought they were just lumps of some foreign matter that had

been forgotten, so I'd been about to throw them out… Well, I suppose you could say they were decorated in a *gyaru*-like way… But anyway.

"As a breather from your studies, I want you to think about this. Consider it a breather for the sake of survival."[56]

"Sounds like you're nonchalantly trying to get me back on track to studying. Araragi-paisen, massive respect. As thanks, y'want me to help solve that problem you're working on? As Higasa Christie."

"If the same thing happened to you, what would you do? What would you think? If there was someone you knew that was so arrogant that they'd never once lowered their head to anyone in their lifetime, but they suddenly came and apologized, would you think they were being sincere? Or would you consider it violence?"

"Well, hmm. If they're throwing away their pride for the sake of that apology, then in other words, it could mean that they believe that apology is as valuable as their pride. Like I said, I personally think that an apology is like posing for appearances, so forgiving them or not forgiving them depends on your previous relationship with them and how close you've really been. There are times where two people might harm you in the same way, but you might forgive one but not the other depending on who they are, right? From what I said earlier, it's because the other person was my junior that I could forgive them as part of the ritual. If they were my advisor, then I definitely wouldn't forgive them just because they lowered their head to me."

"Your relationship with your advisor…"

Even if the bully doesn't consider it bullying, if the bullied person considers it bullying, then it counts as bullying—in that case, if the bullied person doesn't consider it bullying, does it still count as bullying? However, in the case where an abused child covers for their parents, it's certainly not the case that it shouldn't be considered abuse.

"I'd be happy if my boyfriend kissed me, but if a stranger did it, that would be a crime. Not that I can say for sure, since I don't have a boyfriend…"

"Well, that's for sure."

I was about to lose my girlfriend, but still, I had to agree.

It lined up with what Meniko had told me about, too.

However, in Meniko's case, the peculiarity was that the boyfriend's action, which had been performed with mutual consent, was being turned into a crime after the fact.

The relationship, huh… Well, that could be it.

When Hitagi had apologized to me about things that had long since passed, it hurt my feelings. Of course, that was partly because it felt like she had ruined the "good memories I could look back on

fondly". But not only that—it could also be because it made me feel as though she were completely denying our current relationship, and not just the start of our romance.

A complete denial.

Not just ruining what happened a year and eight months ago.

But ruining the entirety of that year and eight months.

When she'd flown into a rage during our first breakup, I hadn't felt that way—because that had just been an extension of the relationship we had built up.

Of course, Oikura went without saying.

In her case, rather than hurting my feelings, it felt like I'd been betrayed. It made me wonder, "Is that what you'd been thinking of our relationship all this time?"

There was nothing sadder.

"Shall we test it out, Araragi-paisen? If you were to kiss me right here, would that be a crime or not? Teehee."

"Again, stop with that 'teehee'!"

It wasn't a laughing matter.

"When someone is taking on the stance of an apology, wouldn't it be fine to just tell them, 'Nice pose!'? Instead of saying, "I'm mad!" Let's praise them and straighten out their backs, which have bent over in apology."

Higasa Christie's answer, which only sounded like her trying to fan the flames, was certainly not the answer I was hoping to hear from this interview, but it was a useful bit of information, or perhaps a useful clinical trial.[57] And, from anyone's perspective, this was clearly the end of the discussion—though the room cleanup was only half-done, from the direction of the porch, on the other side of the wall that encircled the Kanbaru estate, I could hear the sound of thunderous footsteps that seemed like they could erode the asphalt, together with the braking of a bicycle.

The braking of a BMX.

It was the much-awaited return of the title role.

“The timing of an apology is important, too.

“If the other person is in a good mood, or if they’re eating something tasty, or if a third party is present—you have to aim for one of those timings. Conversely, if they’re in a bad mood, or if they’re hungry, or if the two of you are alone on an empty street at night and the other person is carrying a sharp implement, it wouldn’t be wise to apologize then.

“But that might actually be the opposite.

“A poorly-timed apology out of simple honesty, without even considering any of those calculations, might be more likely to touch the person’s heart—otherwise, they might think, ‘Ah, this person waited for a timing that was good for them to apologize.’

“It would get that much harder if they were to come to the misconception that you were thinking only about how to be forgiven—even if you weren’t entirely devoid of those feelings, you might have been aiming for a good timing so as not to hurt the person’s feelings even more.

“Was it really so wrong to want to be forgiven?—but yes, it was wrong. On top of having committed a crime, for you to want to be forgiven for it.

“Rather than doing something and apologizing for it, it was better to do something and not apologize for it—but that wasn’t exactly right, either. Perhaps, in the view of the public that’s kicking up a fuss, the best option would be to apologize and not be forgiven.

“It was like the polar opposite of the selfish idea that there was no point in apologizing if you wouldn’t be forgiven—however, no matter how hard they steel their heart to not forgive, in the end, time will heal even that wound.

“Getting straight to the point, they’ll forget their anger.

“They’ll lose sight of the anger that once made them lose control.

“Then, would it be appropriate to apologize at that time? Would they be bewildered, saying, ‘Even if you apologize for that after all this time, I honestly don’t care,’ or would it just rekindle their anger, with them saying, ‘Apologizing for that now, are you making fun of me?’

“Even though they’d managed to forget.

“To drag it back up again now.

“However, ‘forgetting’ and ‘forgiving’ were, fundamentally, completely different—I’d even say that they weren’t even backward compatible.

“Someone saying that they’ve already forgotten is in itself a very strong expression of forgiveness, but no matter how much they’ve forgotten, if they are reminded of it even once, the feeling that they’ll never forgive will easily rise back up.

“For anger and for resentment, forgetting those feelings doesn’t mean negating them. Though there may be exceptions.

“From a malicious standpoint, I can even think of it as saving those feelings up. If forgetting doesn’t mean forgiving, then in other words, it means that they could revitalize their anger at any time.

“It’s the idea that they’re putting aside their anger for later.

“A trump card of sorts for use in interpersonal relations.

“A Joker that’s played, not after all this time, but because it’s the right time.

“But, there’s a converse to that, too.

“By forgiving, they allow themselves to forget.”

"In English, when they say 'I'm sorry', it can mean two things: 'I'm sorry for what I did', and 'I'm sorry for your loss'. But, between 'please forgive me' and 'what a pity', which apology rings deeper?—ha ha."

That was what Ougi-chan said.

I'd forgotten to mention this earlier, but at the moment, Oshino Ougi was a dark young man clad in a *gakuran*, so perhaps it would be more accurate to refer to him as "Ougi-kun" the way Higasa-chan and Kanbaru did, but with things being what they are, please allow me to keep referring to him as Ougi-chan for now.

Though I'd like it if I didn't sound like a senior calling his junior by an old nickname even after he's grown up—that was what ran through my head as I sat in the back seat of Ougi-chan's BMX.

Of course, there was no such thing as a back seat of a BMX, so I was really riding while standing on top of a metal foothold on the rear wheel, keeping my balance with my hands on Ougi-chan's shoulders.

I'd ridden bicycles like that fairly often in high school, but this might be the first time I was the one in the rear—not to mention, behind my junior. Naturally, as the senior, I had suggested being the one to drive, but Ougi-chan had stubbornly refused to turn over the handlebars (and saddle and pedals).

In the first place, there was no reason that I needed to be riding double with Ougi-chan, but when he'd returned with Kanbaru, Ougi-chan had said,

"Well, I'm actually fairly busy right now. Even if you suddenly come to see me, I do have plans coming up. But I wouldn't dare want to bring shame to Araragi-senpai, who I'd been much obliged to back then, so if you'd like to accompany me on my way there, I'd be happy to hear you out."

And that was how I'd come to be astride his bicycle.

I'd wanted to ask him if he was some culprit from *Columbo*, but when he said he'd be troubled if I suddenly came to see him, I couldn't exactly refute him.

But anyway—damn, Ougi-chan was coldhearted. Even though "back then", he'd been a junior that was so attached to me—ah, well. Right now, Ougi-chan was Kanbaru's buddy after all.

You couldn't rely on old friendships.

That was something I'd already known, wasn't it?

And so, to the fast-footed Kanbaru, who naturally looked tired after having kept pace with a bicycle for quite the distance, I kept it

down to a light hug and air kiss before leaving the Japanese mansion behind me.

Of course, the hug and air kiss were just a charming joke, while what I actually kept light was the interview I conducted. I didn't really need to confirm it, but just to make sure, there was nothing abnormal about Kanbaru, either—if, like Hitagi or Oikura, she were showing the same abnormality, exhibiting the same symptoms, then there was no way she wouldn't be apologizing excessively for the destruction of my beloved mountain bike.

And Ougi-chan may have gotten more curt with me, but with the two of us riding double like this, I got the impression that his aloof behavior hadn't changed.

Okey-dokey, hokey-pokey.[58]

However, at this rate, it probably wouldn't be doable for me to subcontract the results of my investigation to Ougi-chan and then laze around at home—well, such a blueprint had always been a pipe dream even when this junior had been attached to me.

Ougi-chan's uncle and the origin of the Oshino family name, Oshino Meme, didn't help us without any conditions, either—or rather, he didn't help us at all.

People could only help themselves.

Ultimately, he would only lend a hand.

But very well, I didn't come here to bet on certain probabilities anyway—haphazard meetings without making appointments were the same as always. I decided that I would fix that bad habit of mine by the time I graduated from university, but for now, I would focus on the now. Right now.

But how to broach the subject?—I didn't know what destination Ougi-chan was riding to, but I imagined that I didn't have much time to spare. Even while keeping in mind preserving Meniko's privacy, I had better be straight forward…

Even without the luggage rack on this bike, it would be a challenge.[59]

"Ha ha. But Araragi-senpai, I never thought last year that I would be riding double with you on the same bike like this."

"That's for sure. Thinking about it like that, it's really moving, and even kind of nostalgic."

"However, whether you're standing or sitting, riding double is against the law, after all. As a matter of fact, riding a bicycle on a sidewalk like this is in itself a violation of the Road Traffic Act. Shouldn't you be apologizing for this?"

He sure knew how to put a damper on my nostalgia. Well, everything he said was true—but considering he was demonstrating his lawful mindset after telling me to ride behind him, I wasn't sure

how serious he was.

And that mood was nostalgic as well, given our riding double.[60]

“Seeing as I don’t ride bicycles anymore, I don’t know what to say, but… When I did ride bicycles, honestly, it was an illegal activity that I didn’t really mind.”

“What a self-serving statement. After learning how to drive a car, have you completely flipped your opinion to think that bicycles on the road are just in the way?”

“That’s not it…”

If it was the question of if it was dangerous to ride bikes on the road, then that was something I’d considered even when I still rode bikes… But laws have changed, and the number of bicycle-only roads has increased, so safety and danger were not the same.

Consistency, and transience.[61]

“Speaking of observing the law, in police dramas and detective films, when they get into a car chase with the bad guy, people have pointed out that it’s a bit unrealistic to take the time to fasten their seatbelts, for both the one doing the chasing and the one being chased. Araragi-senpai, what do you think about this?”

I may have wanted to rekindle this old friendship that had cooled down, but I didn’t exactly have the time for small talk… However, it was true that, when it came to conversations with Ougi-chan, there was no such thing as small talk.

Everything got to the true heart of the matter.

Or perhaps to falsehood.

“Well, let’s see. Even the bad guy is scared of car crashes, and especially because he’s in a hurry, I don’t think it’s that weird for him to fasten his seatbelt… And there’s no need for the detective to risk his life, either.”

“I see. As expected of a car driver. Your faith in the seatbelt is impressive.”

“But if a bad guy without a driver’s license were to ride a bike with a helmet and protective gear, I’d definitely question that.”

“Ha ha. Indeed. However, Araragi-senpai, if your high school life were to get remade, then those famous scenes of you riding double with Senjougahara-senpai or Hanekawa-senpai would be completely and utterly cut, wouldn’t they?”

What do you mean by remaking my high school life.

I’d nearly made that retort and laughed things off, but it seemed that we’d long since gotten to the main subject.

Even though I hadn’t gotten the ball rolling at all…

“Ougi-chan. What—or how much—do you already know?”

“I don’t know anything. You’re the one who knows—Araragi-

senpai."

That was what Ougi-chan said as he faced forward—just as he'd done in the past.

"After all this time, Araragi-senpai, if you were to begin apologizing to everyone for your double riding in the past, it would seem rather questionable. Especially when those scenes left such good impressions on viewers like me."

"Let's at least discuss the novels, too?"

In the first place, you weren't even here for those scenes where I was riding double.

"So what, are you wondering whether it would've been fine or not to rewrite those scenes when republishing them in paperback? In that case, then even if it didn't go for a hundred pages, maybe I should've just gone and properly written that scene of fooling around with Karen and Tsukihi without cutting it."

"However, if you were to ask if the director's cut version is always better, then that's not always the case."

He was always coming up with counterarguments.

Like a junior with a hobby of stirring things up in debates.

Stirring things up—and flipping them over.

"The mythical last scene that was sealed away before publishing has now been included! But even if that were to happen, people will say that they liked their first impressions better. Or that it felt like an unnecessary change."

"It's pretty common for remakes to soften up the parts that could be provocative, so that probably means that there are a lot of people that want that."

Actually, maybe not.

I might have just been assuming an invisible majority for the sake of follow-up.

"The decision-making process can be rather opaque. It's often the case that, after much deliberation with many people, the conclusion that is reached is one that neither satisfies nor benefits anybody—since I am a boy right now, I'm in a position to give it my all in supporting the social advancement of women, but just because I'm in favor of gender parity, that doesn't mean I think that they should change the genders of the characters in *Doraemon* to achieve that. It's a matter of course that there should be less scenes of Shizuka-chan in the bath, but I wouldn't say that one of Gian or Suneo should be a girl instead."

Even before that, seeing as you've changed your gender with the start of the new school year, it's a bit questionable for you to say that, but in any case, this wasn't even an extreme argument. If we were to dig into the concept of changing gender, we'd find that there

have been several cases in the past where the role of Watson was made into a woman in drama adaptations of mystery novels—but how would people feel about that now?

"Ha ha. It would be as shocking as if, in Lupin's gang, Goemon were to be changed into a swordswoman. In the other way, the appearance of a male PreCure should be viewed positively, so there's a balance to everything. Like the front and back sides."

Front and back.

The front side is a part of the back side.

"Speaking of which, in *Ojamajo Doremi*, there was that one team of male wizards, weren't there… It became a much bigger topic of discussion than when a female Kamen Rider showed up. In that case, would you argue that next year's Sentai heroes should be a six-member team, with only half being male? Although you could say that we've already struck a balance with Sentai heroes and PreCures."

"That's something that Ishinomori Shoutarou-sensei has written about in his manga, *009-1*. A true pioneer."

"*009-1*?"

That title sounded like a parody that a new writer might have come up with for fun… Tokiwa-sou was kind of an incredible apartment building.

"When you pick up a manga by any of the members from Tokiwa-sou, you'll almost always see something like this written at the end. 'The depictions found in this work may not be appropriate in light of modern social values, but they have been published without alteration under the historical context of when the work was originally published.'"

"The conclusion being that, if we're going to make changes, we should make them in the future, not the past, right? It's an idea that you can apply to the lineup of Disney Princesses."

"It's like referring to those times as 'the good old days'. But was that era in which the naked bodies of female characters were exposed in *shounen* magazines really all that good? Some people might refer to it as the Dark Ages."

After becoming a boy, his examples had gotten cruder… But still, it was a tough concept. There was the criticism of, "Portrayals have become lukewarm nowadays," but if you countered that by saying, "Portrayals in the past have had lackluster CGI," it wouldn't exactly be striking a nice balance.

The asymmetry was apparent.

Speaking from my own experience, the past and the future weren't necessarily in perfect symmetry… Even without having been alive for six hundred years, it was obvious to me that they were a single, continuous thing.

Even if our lands weren't adjoined, we were still connected by the same sky.

"Meanwhile, there are some people that would find the naked bodies of male characters to be stimulating… Ha ha. The reasoning that it's fine for men to show some skin is ultimately just self-serving. But in conclusion, in regards to the question of if people in a car chase should fasten their seatbelts, all they need to do is ride in antique cars that don't come with seatbelts attached. Would you accept this as a solution?"

"Er, no, that conclusion doesn't work for me."

That didn't solve anything.

For one thing, I was driving a brand-new New Beetle.

"Under that reasoning, we'd end up remaking those riding double scenes using those funny tandem bicycles that have two saddles and two sets of pedals. They'd become funny scenes."

"My, my. Then, shall the two of us continue this monologue a little more? Your concern is that, basically, Senjougahara-senpai and Oikura-senpai are stubbornly apologizing for things in the past, correct?"

"Huh? Did I already tell you about that?"

"You did. You told me about how the double heroines with crazy personalities have teamed up and are eager to remake their stained past."

I didn't think I'd already told him about that, and if I did tell him about that, then I didn't think I would have used that wording, but if that was what Ougi-chan was saying, then it had to be true. It was quite the slip of the tongue to refer to Hitagi and Oikura as double heroines.

That was more cruel than "generic girl".

"And you also mentioned how the only friend you were able to make in university encountered a similar situation. As your junior, it fills my heart with pride to hear you celebrate your university life, my dearly beloved Araragi-senpai."

"If I've said that I only made one friend, I'm clearly not celebrating. Not to mention, I'm about to be breaking up with my girlfriend and childhood friend for some incomprehensible reason."

I was in despair.

To think I'd reach a point even lower than I'd been in high school.

"Putting aside the case with your friend, your own cases shouldn't be all that incomprehensible, Araragi-senpai. You already have enough of an idea of what's going on, right?"

"If they hadn't said what they did, then maybe. I could understand for either case if they were cutting me off because I moved

in next door to Oikura, but right now, they're talking about stuff from way back when."

"However, there do exist crimes with no statute of limitations."

"Are you saying that whatever was done to me was as bad as murder?"

"It's up to interpretation. Personally, when it comes to the idea that Senjougahara-senpai and Oikura-senpai expanded their horizons after entering university and became ashamed of their past actions, I don't think it's that strange compared to you, Araragi-senpai. Oikura-senpai's aggressive apologizing may have made you confident that this was an abnormal situation, but from my perspective, as someone who was graciously allowed to accompany you during her case, isn't it simply likely that her unstable emotions caused her to experience flashbacks and behave unusually?"

"I considered that, too."

"Even if you told me that she cut her stomach open with a ballpoint pen while apologizing, it would still be within the limits of acceptable behavior."

"What exactly are you saying is acceptable for my childhood friend?"

That wasn't something I could allow or condone.

In the first place, it wasn't as though I hadn't considered that worst-case scenario—even in my conversation with Higasa Christie, the idea of committing *seppuku* as an extreme form of "apology" had been brought up.

If your goal were to be the end of your life, that would be a big problem.

"However, Araragi-senpai, while the sequence of events is opposite from yours, it's quite interesting to me that the circumstances and timing of your only friend's case seem to line up. It makes me want to actually get this heavy body of mine into gear."

"Your footwork used to be a lot lighter when you were involved with me."

"I'm no longer in my prime, anymore. I can just barely keep up with Kanbaru-senpai's pace—not to mention, just as you had been, Araragi-senpai, she will soon be graduating, too."

"That's true. I had better celebrate her graduation… In that case, can you start haunting that dropout Higasa-chan next?"

"When it comes to that type of person, there's no opportunity for monstrous apparitions to take the stage. Whether she becomes a dropout or finds a job or embarks on a journey to wander the world, she'll find her own way to go."

"That last one is just Hanekawa Tsubasa, isn't it."

That's someone who could've become a monstrous apparition

herself.

"Anyway, now that I've become all old and decrepit, I don't know if I'll be able to resolve your concerns, Araragi-senpai, but through the wisdom that comes from old age, shall I at least perform a bit of analysis?"

"I don't want to hear 'decrepit' and 'wisdom of old age' from my junior."

"After hearing the results of your fieldwork achieved by your light footwork, Araragi-senpai, I've been able to come up with about thirteen possibilities."

"Thirteen?"

That's a lot.

And it was a bad omen.

"It's thanks to you going all around and conducting surveys here and there, Araragi-senpai. Not just your friend, Senjougahara-senpai, and Oikura-senpai, but also Shinobu-chan, your little sisters, and even Higasa-senpai. As a result, I was able to squeeze the possibilities down to this much. Compared to when you used to relegate all those girls to my uncle, you sure have grown.

Relegate all those girls, you say.

Both your impression of me and your impression of your uncle are terrible, huh.

"Ougi-chan, even after squeezing, thirteen is too much. There's still some pulp left in that fruit juice, so let's make it more like a smoothie and smooth it down. If you're going to praise my growth, then let's squeeze it down a bit more. Throw out the ones that are the most unlikely, or combine the ones that are similar."

There was no way I could remember thirteen.

If possible, I'd like it to be a single-digit number, or even a number that would round down to zero.

"It sounds like your brain has regressed after entering university. You should at least be able to memorize thirteen things."

"I've always been bad at subjects that involve memorization. That's why I enrolled in the mathematics department, since it's my only strong suit."

"And yet the fact that you can get along with those extremely humanities-oriented people means you're not just phoning it in, huh, Araragi-senpai? But, understood. Since it's a request from none other than Araragi-senpai himself, I'll compromise and squeeze it down to five possibilities."

That barely counts as a compromise.

So he had this side to him, too.

As high-handed as he was with his opinions, he would never really pinpoint anything—you could say that the way he eloquently

avoided teaching you the key point of anything was something inherited from his uncle.

Very well, I'll give up on rounding down.

"Ha ha. Speaking of which, the word for rounding is pretty amusing, isn't it? It's written as "four's thrown away but five enters", but why was "enter" chosen as the antonym for "throw away"?—it should be "pick up" instead."[62]

"Is that also the asymmetry of the front and back sides?"

"Front and back—the asymmetry of perpetrators and victims, right? How very interesting. If you would allow me to speak frankly, in regards to the idea of the front side being a part of the back side, I would say I've been utterly taken in by it. As a backstage type of character myself, I've let myself be deceived by it. And it's also true that I'm glad that you've made a good friend in university."

If I were to be told that you, Araragi-senpai, were a part of me, then I might even agree—said Ougi-chan, shrugging his shoulders.

In other words, taking his hands off the handlebars.

It was something I absolutely didn't want when riding double—since it was a BMX, I was afraid he'd start doing tricks like wheelies.

"In the first place, when it comes to the side that apologizes and the side that is apologized to, you can consider it a form of asymmetric warfare. That's the first possibility."

"Huh?"

"I'm saying that it's #1. Asymmetric warfare. That's a thought experiment you've already carried out with Higasa-senpai, right? Since you've referred to it as aggressive apologizing, it's taken on a rather violent tone."

Ah.

That thing about how the best defense is a good offense.

"In this case, Araragi-senpai, attacking you is what matters to those girls. Going on the offensive by excessively apologizing is what matters, so the idea is that the subject of those apologies doesn't matter at all. If anything, the more irrational the apologies are, the more effective they would be. If they're irrational, there's no logic to them at all, so they can't be refuted."

"In fact, they really did put me at a loss."

In a sense, I'd been at more of a loss than after I'd had my cheek stapled. I'd brought up the idea of apology harassment before, but it was astonishing to think that this pattern of domestic violence could exist.

"Of course, this is only if you've sensed any aggression in the roots of this abnormal phenomenon. But it is true, after all, that the two of them were displeased with the current love triangle, correct?"

"Our relationship isn't exactly good enough to refer to it as a

love triangle…"

Not that a love triangle itself was a good thing.

As for whether or not that sort of balance existed in Meniko and Boyfie-kun's relationship… Considering the uninhibited nature of her relationships, I wouldn't be surprised if there were.

In that case, it would imply that there was blame that lay with Meniko and me, but it made no sense to reject the idea out of hand…

As usual, he said the most unpleasant things.

"By the way, Ougi-chan, in terms of the order of these hypotheses, are we starting with the most likely one?"

"It's as you say. You really do understand me—and so, #2 is, as you've said, #2. Self-punishing tendencies."

"Self-punishing tendencies?"

"Perhaps it's more accurate to call it self-destructive—as you've mentioned before, it's the idea that, after broadening their horizons in university, they're now repenting for their past wrongdoings that they once thought nothing of. It's not that they're dragging it back up again, but that they've finally realized that those things they did were unforgivable. In that sense, it's a very human-like development."

If you can grow just a little more, Araragi-senpai, you might even learn to feel apologetic towards your little sisters—said Ougi-chan, making some sort of snide remark towards me.

Whatever he was trying to insinuate, I hadn't the slightest idea… Though I would prefer if my sisters would someday grow enough to understand my affection for them.

"Ha ha. That's also an excuse that a perpetrator would make. However, Araragi-senpai, if your little sisters were to begin to commit *seppuku* in your home, it would be just as hard to accept, right?"

"Well, of course… But when it comes to Hitagi's or Oikura's tendencies, it feels like #2 is more likely than #1?"

"They're actually neck and neck. According to my estimates, their self-punishing tendencies and your resentability are locked in a fierce battle."

Some pretty unpleasant things were battling it out.

Among the possibilities that had been squeezed down, there could also be the case that the two of those were complexly entangled. And that would be an unpleasant entanglement.

"#3. Self-sacrifice,"

said Ougi-chan, continuing his presentation… Perhaps we were already getting close to his destination. If he had started with the most likely possibilities, then he surely wasn't saving the best for last, so I didn't mind if he took some shortcuts for the latter half… Not to mention that I was the one who requested a number that could be

rounded… But, self-sacrifice?

"Araragi-senpai, you've already completely and utterly forgotten, but I still happen to remember Sengoku-chan. Back when she used to try and resolve everything by saying 'sorry'."

"It's not like I've forgotten, really."

Ah… But, it was as he said.

Her snake god transformation had left such a strong impression on me that her personality from before that had somewhat fallen from my mind.

Now that he'd mentioned it, Sengoku Nadeko was the kind of middle school girl who'd say "sorry" and resolve everything by apologizing.

"Ha ha. Sengoku-chan was so cute back then. Though she's lost all that cuteness now—it might even be the dark history of her dark ages now. Something she might want to apologize for again."

However, if you were to ask me if Sengoku was nothing but cute back then, then honestly, it was quite difficult to be on the receiving end of her apologies.

But it was still puzzling. Was that self-sacrifice?

Disregarding future confrontations, it was true that her aggressive apologizing back then had not been done with the intent of attacking me, and it didn't seem like she'd been trying to punish herself, either…

"The apology isn't the goal, but the method. It's a way of taking responsibility by saying that you're at fault for everything and anything, whatever it may be, in order to keep the peace. No, I suppose it's more of a way of taking irresponsibility."

"A way of taking—irresponsibility."

"'I'm very sorry, everything is my fault'—one secret to success states that you can easily reconcile everything by going all-out with a full-scale apology. Higasa-senpai likened an apology to a ritual or manners, but this would be like the abuse of that."

It might be poor phrasing to refer to it as abuse, but when you're in an argument, there is some strategy in being the first to back down. After all, when competing to see who is in the right, there would be no end to it otherwise.

You have to lose in order to win.

People say that apologizing means losing, but you can turn the game around by winning via apologizing.

"But self-sacrifice isn't necessarily something beautiful."

"You would be abandoning your relationships, after all. Self-sacrifice is such that it's for the sake of the self. Devotion of both the body and mind to oneself. It's almost like declaring, 'I have no intention of holding a proper conversation with you.' It's the same sort

of excuse as saying, ‘I’ll take it into consideration,’ or, ‘I’ll see what I can do.’ It becomes pretty obvious that you’re really just thinking, ‘I’m apologizing, so just give it a rest already.’”

I didn’t think Sengoku was that evil in those bygone days… Since she was shy and faint of heart, it was more likely that Sengoku considered apologizing as a way to forcibly end a conversation.

By admitting your faults, you rid yourself of your faults.

“If you can resolve something by apologizing, then it’s a small price to pay” certainly was a secret to success—a secret to success that was much too adult for a middle school girl to use.

“She was, like, seriously annoying, right? That phony girl.”

“I didn’t say she was seriously annoying. I seriously didn’t say that. I didn’t say she was phony either. And this isn’t one of those cases where ‘If Ougi-chan is saying so, then I must have said so,’ either. Even though you’d just mentioned how Sengoku-chan used to be cute, for you to say this right after that… What a guy you are. But anyway, how does this apply to Hitagi or Oikura? If they don’t think I’m in the wrong, and they don’t think they’re in the wrong, either?”

“Beyond being right or wrong, it could be that they have some other reason for wanting to end the relationship. Perhaps even your change of residence is unrelated, like it doesn’t even matter anymore. Maybe they want to concentrate on their studies, or they want to work on a new hobby, or she found a new guy she liked, or she found a new childhood friend to hate.”

“What do you mean by a new childhood friend to hate. Are you trying to bring in a new character after all this time?”

However, in Oikura’s case, it was true that we were able to maintain our relationship because of how much she hated me… Perhaps she really had grown as a person after entering university and gotten tired of hating me.

Gotten tired. Of me.

That might actually be possible.

However, she wouldn’t be able to simply say that she’d “gotten tired of me”, so she dragged out past misdeeds that were irrefutably her fault and was misusing them as excuses or pretexts… And in fact, this reasoning was applicable to Meniko’s case, too.

Meniko herself had started to lose interest in that relationship, after all… So it wasn’t hard to believe that the other side was thinking the same way.

“It’s a common show of consideration between couples to try and end the relationship by making yourself out to be the bad guy. In that scenario, it’s more like, ‘Yay! I became the bad guy!’ Like a combination technique with #1. Asymmetric warfare.”

“It’s really amazing that there are explanations for this crazy

situation that I'm in, without having to resort to oddity phenomena."

"I haven't said that there weren't any stories of oddities involved. It would be less of a problem if they were individual cases, but the simultaneous nature of them is still a cause for concern—in that sense, while #4 may have a low probability, it's the strongest candidate from an emotional standpoint."

"The strongest candidate from an emotional standpoint?"

"#4. Chain of command."

Unusually for him, Ougi-chan responded immediately.

"The case where they're apologizing because they were commanded to by someone else. Since it can happen out of consideration from others, it's a command in the broad definition of the word. The subject of *seppuku* has come up already, but isn't *seppuku* basically something that you are commanded to do?—it's not self-punishment, but a punishment that is given by someone else. With that in mind, it's inevitable for your apologizing to become excessive. In order to prove that you have properly apologized, some level of performance is necessary, after all."

"Performance—"

"From what I have heard so far, Araragi-senpai, it appears that you and Higasa-senpai, kindhearted as you are, have considered that apologies may be sincere or insincere, but that they are not compelled by a third party. But it is true that 'having to write a letter of apology' is a potential judicial decision that can result from a trial. There were times where you could only see words of apology as having been written unwillingly, or words of introspection as having been forced by a teacher, right?"

I understood—but were Hitagi and Oikura the kind of girls that you could give commands to…? If this were some time ago, then Hanekawa could have shouldered that burden, and speaking of which there had been a refreshing development where Hitagi had been forced into apologizing under Hanekawa's command, but unlike the time when she was a class president, right now (with her current whereabouts unknown), she wouldn't do something like that.

"Okay, so I agree that, no matter how much people say that it's done for honor, the ones that willingly committed *seppuku* probably weren't in the majority, and there's no way people would be perfectly happy to accept punishment or liability—but chain of command?"

"Yes. The imperative form, and the chain of command.[63] And it could be that an oddity is appearing within that—or, while it surely isn't Sengoku-chan, perhaps it's some sort of curse."

"A curse—"

"As I've already mentioned, I myself do not estimate the possibility of this being very high, but such an oddity does in fact

exist. Or rather—it doesn't exist."

Uncertain, odd—and bewitching.[64]

Ougi-chan turned his head around on the vertical axis to lock eyes with me sitting behind him—his dark pupils that seemed like they could suck you in met mine. Although this was also a violation of the law, in the form of not looking where he was driving.

The specialist's nephew said,

"*Ayamarei*. The 'phantom command'—or perhaps, the 'phantom spirit',"[65]

in a relaxed manner.

"...Is that thing that sounds like a bad pun supposed to be what I'm contending against this time around?"

"No, no, this monster is certainly no laughing matter."

Depending on the situation.

Not even a vampire could contend against it.

“Apologize.”

Right when he'd said something so meaningful, Ougi-chan's BMX ended up arriving close to his destination, so far from hearing about possibility #5, I didn't even get the time to hear the details about #4. Chain of command, nor the oddity that it consisted of—I wanted to say that investigating all thirteen possibilities would have been impossible, but if anything, the half-baked nature of this was probably all according to Ougi-chan's plan anyway.

Well done.

On top of that, his destination was also quite unexpected, and it made me feel really aggravated to learn that this kid really had me accompany him part of the way to such a place—I couldn't just stick around after having been brought here, so I had no choice but to retreat gallantly, or rather, dejectedly.

Where we'd arrived was the Sengoku residence.

The home of Sengoku Nadeko.

"Ougi-chan, why in the world would you bring me to a place like this—there's a limit to bad taste. When you brought up that episode of Sengoku saying sorry, was that just foreshadowing? You haven't had enough, so you're planning on meddling with Sengoku again?"

"Oh, don't call it meddling. If anything, I'm here to atone for my sins. I have been doing a bit of reflection on my actions, since I feel like I went a little too far last year when it came to her—ha ha."

This may also be an apology in its own way, boasted Ougi-chan.

"It's an apology demonstrated through my attitude. Although, from Sengoku-chan's point of view, she probably doesn't think that I'd done anything. But you can relax, Araragi-senpai. While my destination might have been here, the Sengoku residence, Sengoku-chan herself has already left this house."

"She already left? She ran away again…?"

How could I relax at that information?

It made me nothing but anxious.

"It wouldn't be running away, but shedding her skin—after all, she was once a snake god."

That didn't make a whole lot of sense, but personally, even if Sengoku wasn't around anymore, I still didn't want to loiter around the Sengoku residence. The reason being that I had effectively had a restraining order placed on me.

With Ougi-chan assuming an air of importance, it almost made me stick around just a little bit longer, but I needed to make my

escape—I had no choice but to scurry away in retreat. Perhaps it was luck, or just a twist of fate, but since Sengoku was a friend of my sister from elementary school, the Sengoku residence was naturally within walking distance of the Araragi residence. Even if I were let off here, I could easily return on foot—considering Ougi-chan's personality, it wouldn't have been strange if he stranded me on a mountain somewhere, so you could say this was a real blessing. With my legs having gotten too weak as a result of this car-based society, I couldn't walk long distances anymore.

"Ha ha. There's no way the legs of a vampire would have gotten weak at all."

"I'm a 'former' vampire, Ougi-chan. …I'm still going to be running away, but Ougi-chan, what business do you have at the Sengoku residence without Sengoku? I doubt you're going there just to greet her parents."

"If I were here to greet them, it would make much more sense for one Koyomi-onii-chan to greet them first."

"Oh, screw you."

"I just had a small request to pick up something that she'd left behind in her closet. From Sengoku-chan herself, you see… Even she herself doesn't want to get too close to her parents' home, so I was singled out—or rather, snaked out.[66] For more details, please start from the second row of page 193."

"'Please start from the second row,' my ass."

Well, at least the youngsters were having a good time. Kanbaru and Higasa-chan, Ougi-chan and Sengoku, all of them—it made me plainly realize that, in this town, it wasn't my era anymore.

Not that it was ever my era to begin with.

Feeling an oddly pleasant sense of alienation, I parted ways with Ougi-chan and returned home… From behind, I heard the loud sound of glass breaking, but I pretended that I didn't hear it. It sounded much like a *gakuran*-wearing scoundrel had thrown a rock through a living room window, but there was no way such a phenomenon would arise from a request as peaceful as, "Please go and pick up something that I've left behind."

Speaking of it no longer being my era, it was a bit of a shock to discover upon returning home that I no longer had a room there. More precisely, the space that had previously been my room up until several months ago had been taken over by one of my sisters… Perhaps she had been dissatisfied with the single room that had been allocated to her, for she moved to expand her territory as soon as I moved out… Of course, the sister that took over my room was not the bigger one, but the smaller one.

So, even if I returned to my parents' home, there wasn't really

a place for me anymore. But it was getting late, so I would have to make do with any open space, whether it was the sofa in the dining room or the floor of a hallway. It wasn't that I was unwilling to drive at night as a new driver (if anything, my eyes were especially strong at night), so I could return to my apartment if I wanted to, but there still remained one more location I wanted to visit during my homecoming.

Whether there was a place for me or not, since I'd returned to this town, I couldn't just leave without visiting *her*… And I couldn't leave without visiting *that* place—so, the next day, early in the morning, I pretended to go on a walk before breakfast and set off towards the Kitashirahebi Shrine.

Incidentally, the night before, where I'd slept was in my sister's bed, in my sister's room that was formerly my own room, together with my sister… I was fully aware that it was because I did these things that Shinobu kept saying all that about me, but, well, habit is second nature.

"How obnoxious. You should be imprisoned."

I even heard her say something like that, but eventually, with my weakened legs, I was able to steadily climb the local mountain (that was by no means gently sloped) and finally arrived at the shrine at the mountaintop.

Since it was early in the morning, the shrine grounds were unattended… To the point that it made me worried. Compared to the ruined state it had been in when I'd first visited, the Kitashirahebi Shrine had been splendidly reconstructed and still appeared sparklingly new, but when no one was around, there was a different sort of eeriness from the ruined shrine.

That reminds me, even on the year's first shrine visit, I didn't see any other visitors… Was this shrine really getting by properly?

It would be awful if it turned back into a hotspot for oddities.

Anyway, I wanted to hear what she had to say, so regarding the god that didn't dare draw near the couple tensely discussing breaking up the other day, how should I go about calling her out… From my pocket, I pulled out the eight 10-yen coins, one 5-yen coin, and four 1-yen coins that I had prepared—in other words, a total of 89 yen.

And, in order to call out the snail god Hachikuji Mayoi, the new god that had inherited the shrine from the snake god, hesitating[67] in front of the offertory box over whether or not to toss in 89 yen was an unavoidable ritual passed down since ancient times.

"Um, please don't randomly make up your own rituals for my shrine. For something as little as 89 yen, please just toss it in right away. 'Since ancient times'? It hasn't even been a year since I took on

this position—Kararafu-san."

"It's an honor to have my name flubbed for the first time in a while, especially by a god, but Hachikuji, don't say my name like it's a university report card.[68] My name is Araragi."

"Indeed. Araragi-san's report card would be all Fs."

"Don't make me repeat a year!"

She appeared in a rather lukewarm manner this time, huh.

Not to mention, from the shadow of the offertory box… Strictly speaking, she was still hiding in the shadow of the offertory box rather than showing herself, but her characteristic twintails were peeking out. The god that was hiding her head without hiding her hair…[69] With her crouching down over there, she seemed less like a god and more like an offertory thief, though. She was in her usual attire, too, looking as though she were trying to carry the offertory box on her back as opposed to her rucksack.

"Sorry. I flubbed it."

"No, it was on purpose."

"I fwubbed it."

"It wasn't on purpose!?"

The full version!?

Hold on, I didn't actually remember what the full length exactly was.

"Well, what can you do? Everyone's had a time where they fumbled their words at least once in their lives. Or are you trying to tell me, Araragi-san, that you've never flubbed a word since the day you were born?"

"Uh… Um? I can't say that I've never flubbed before, but I would never flub in such a weird way, you know?"

"Then, please repeat after me. Can mew imyagine an imyaginyary mewnyagerie mewnyager imyagining mewnyaging an imyaginyary mewnyagerie?"

"Your memory is faint, too!"

You're mixing it up with other bantering with other characters.

But, well, more than anything, I was glad that she was still going strong… I was apprehensive that I wouldn't be able to see her this time, since I hadn't been able to see her on the first shrine visit (even if it was a bad habit of mine to move haphazardly without making an appointment, how would you even make an appointment with a god—write it on an *ema*?[70]), but it was a groundless apprehension. Although it was a mystery why Hachikuji was sitting behind the offertory box in the first place.

"No, I figured we would be better off without seeing each other's faces. Considering the reason for your visit, Araragi-san."

"? My reason? If anything, I came because I wanted to see your

face…”

“There you go again. Araragi-san, whenever you come to visit me, aren’t you always carrying some sort of hopeless burden with you?”

Hold on, you were never a character that held the position of a smart person that I could rely on in my time of need. If you’d been one, I’d say you should’ve shown your face during the first shrine visit—but even now, you were still hiding.

“How discerning of you. It’s actually something that Ougi-san requested of me. He told me about how his Araragi-senpai was troubled over something, and wanted me to lend you an ear.”

“Huh? Ougi-chan came here?”

“Yes. In the middle of the night, under the cover of darkness.”

Quite literally operating in the shadows, huh.[71]

As expected of the title role—after stealing from, that is, retrieving what had been left behind in the Sengoku residence, that kid must have gone on to visit the Kitashirahebi Shrine. It seemed he’d anticipated my movements… Sheesh, acting like he’s seen through me, just like his uncle.

If he was going to do all that, then I couldn’t help but think that he could have just come directly to the Araragi residence, but that roundabout way of providing backup really was just like his uncle.

“Actually, apparently he did visit the Araragi residence at one point. He’d been planning on breaking in through a second-floor window, but he spotted you and Tsukihi-san sharing a bed and was so turned off that he left.”

“Whoops, you’ve got me there.”

“You can’t just pass it off with a ‘whoops’.”

You can’t just pass it off as her brother, either, said Hachikuji, which was pretty clever.[72] Then, “So, what happened, Araragi-san?” she prompted.

“If you’re okay with me, I’ll hear you out, okay?”

“Don’t just suddenly come swinging with an imitation of Gahara-san. But really, how much have you heard from Ougi-chan? Hachikuji, what exactly do you know?”

“I don’t know anything—you’re the one who knows, Araragi-san.”

“A chain of imitations!”

“Considering the theme, this is a perfect fit, isn’t it? For this situation.”

“? Aah.”

For a moment, I didn’t understand what she was trying to tell me, but then I understood.

I'd been wondering why she was crouching in that hiding place and not showing her face, but it turned out she was using the offertory box as a confessional. That was from a different religion, but… Confession.

If so, it would've been easier to understand if she had entered the offertory box. A girl walking around carrying a confessional on her back sounded like some other oddity.

"Now, Araragi-san. Don't you have something you need to apologize to me for? Please go ahead and confess your sins."

"Heheh. I can confess my love, but I have no sins to confess. For as long as I've been alive, I have nothing to be ashamed of. I don't keep any reasons to bow my head, since it lowers the worth of my soul."

"Because you forcibly pulled me out of hell, Araragi-san, I have to carry out my duties at this shrine for near-eternity, you know?"

"You're only saying that now!?"

Oh my goodness!

I was sure that I was going to be condemned for randomly hugging Hachikuji from behind back in the past, but this was serious!

This wasn't just playing around!

"Serious or not, Araragi-san, it's your fault that I've been rigidly tied down to this mountain, yet you're the one who gets to leave this town and head to the capital! Isn't that weird?"

"Well, maybe, but…"

Even if you talk about it like *Kachi-kachi Yama*.[73]

I'd been egotistically assuming that she didn't show herself during the first shrine visit because of the awkward tension between me and Hitagi, but it was actually because she was mad at me for moving up to the capital?

Although, even if we called it "the capital", it wasn't like I went to Tokyo.

"That's right. It would be more like a little Kyoto."[74]

"That makes Kyoto the standard for cities, though… But Hachikuji, didn't we talk about that matter already…?"

We should have already talked about it.

Or rather—I should have already apologized for it.

"Yes. However, I'm still allowed to change my mind."

"Change your mind?"

"I may have forgiven you for it back then, but thinking about it now, I decided that I couldn't forgive you. It would be like I got mad at you all over again, or like I started wanting to enact divine punishment on you. Just thinking that everything is resolved with a single apology is proof that you aren't actually sorry at all."

"That's kinda scary."

Hachikuji was only capable of enacting divine punishment because I kidnapped her from hell in the first place, but when she spoke like that, it felt like she really wasn't mincing her words, or it felt like I was losing everything…[75]

Ah, is that it?

In the cases of Hitagi and Oikura, I'd been thinking, "Why are you bringing all that up now?" But when you flip around the victim and perpetrator, it turns into a situation like this.

I may have believed that I'd been forgiven, or maybe I'd even believed that I'd been innocent from the beginning, but afterwards, it's possible for going to the capital, er, the situation[76], to change—at the moment that I'd snatched Hachikuji out of hell, it wasn't like I'd made any detailed plans for leaving the town.

"Well, it's a small-scale problem."

"Uh—small-scale? No, this is actually a huge problem, isn't it? After all, the matter with Sengoku had already been settled…"

"Sorry, I flubbed it. I meant to say, it's a problem of scale."[77]

"The meaning is completely different!"

"I used myself as an example to make it easier to understand, but for another example, Araragi-san. Hanekawa-san, whom you love and respect, has had her life veer off in a crazy direction after meeting you, correct? Though she was once an honors student among honors students, a class representative among class representatives, she ended up renouncing university for some reason. Even though Araragi-san, the dropout, was able to attend university without a care in the world. Even though he got to go to the capital."

If she was going to dig that deep into me going to the "capital" that was more a little Kyoto, it wasn't really just an example anymore… Well, it wasn't like I didn't understand what she was trying to say, as that point was a vital point and a weak point for me.

Plus, Hanekawa's whereabouts were presently unknown.

I figured she'd send a postcard soon, so I wasn't worrying too much, but with that in mind, I felt like I wanted to give her a formal apology. No matter how Hanekawa herself felt about it, I felt one-sidedly apologetic—the *ayamarei*.

"All right. It's my bad, Hachikuji. It was selfish of me to bring you out of hell without making any advance arrangements. And I also feel sorry for leaving town without talking to you about it first."

"Well, even if you apologize after all this time."

"Eh? Is that how you're going to respond?"

When you're the one bringing this back up after all this time?

At least, that was what I wanted to say, but considering I was the perpetrator in this situation, I couldn't retort like that to the victim complaining…

“That’s why it’s a problem of scale, Araragi-san. In actuality, Araragi-san, if you were to obsequiously apologize to Hanekawa-san, that looks-obsessed girl would surely look taken aback.[78] She would probably think that she’d been hit by an incredible locust plague, with you being the locust.”[79]

“Since she might have actually experienced a locust plague before, it’s hard to laugh at that.”

When I was talking with Higasa-chan at the Kanbaru estate about secret gadgets we wanted, perhaps I should’ve thought of the Bow-Bow Grasshopper—putting aside the fact that Hanekawa was made into a looks-obsessed girl for the sake of a pun, if I were to classify it under Ougi-chan’s categories, would this be #2. Self-punishing tendencies? To the point of ignoring her feelings, I wanted to apologize to Hanekawa in order to reduce my own feelings of guilt… Objectively, it was pretty disgraceful, but for me, that could actually convey my sincerity better.

Even if the other party were to be hurt even further by my apology, I wouldn’t be able to live with myself without apologizing.

“And that may be why confessionals are necessary. Instead of apologizing to that person, you can apologize to a god. You may rest easy, Araragi-san. For I will forgive your sins.”

“How generous you are.”

Even though you were the one to bring it back up.

Speaking of which, this was just the leftovers of my knowledge from studying for entrance exams, but was it True Pure Land Buddhism that “evil persons were the targets of salvation”? “Even a good person will be received in Buddha’s Land, so how much more an evil person?”—as a good person that was lacking in discipline, it was hard to readily accept, but this could also be a problem of scale.

“I will forgive all your sins, so first, please put all your wrongfully-obtained possessions in this offertory box. For they will become offerings.”

“That’s just a corrupt religion!”

I couldn’t laugh at that, either. After all, the Senjougahara household had had their possessions entirely taken away from them by that kind of corrupt religion. Her wealthy family fell to ruin, she lost her mother, and as for Hitagi herself—I didn’t know for sure exactly what she thought, but it was probably something she would never forgive. Hence why it was wrongful conduct.

And on top of that—there were five con men, weren’t there?

Even if, for example, the unlikely event of all those perpetrators apologizing were to occur… That would just be a new act of harm. A secondary act of harm called the apology. Even if their intent was either #2. Self-punishing tendencies or #3. Self-sacrifice,

the result would effectively be #1. Asymmetrical warfare.

Well, in reality, all those perpetrators apologizing would never happen unless they were forced to do so by a court, so it would really fall under #4. Chain of command.

"...That reminds me, Hachikuji. Did you happen to hear from Ougi-chan what #5 was supposed to be? Also, if you happened to hear what kind of oddity the *ayamarei* is, it would save me the trouble of having to look it up in the university library."

"My, my. Even though you could have just called it a library, the fact that you went out of your way to call it the university library, Araragi-san, shows that you've completely fallen prisoner to this society obsessed with educational backgrounds. Not like a vampire, but as stuck-up as a tengu."

"What an unpleasant way to say it… It's as unpleasant as how Ougi-chan would say it…"

"But yes, I've heard about both those things."

Darn it, Ougi-chan, you didn't tell me anything, but you went off chattering away to Hachikuji… In the first place, wasn't it weird that the two of you were close? I didn't want to bring this back up, but I kind of got the feeling that Hachikuji falling down to hell was partly Ougi-chan's responsibility…

"Ougi-san is fine. It's Araragi-san who's no good."

Even though she'd just forgiven me, what she was saying was a mess… But even so, I suppose this was also the truth.

The truth, or perhaps, her state of mind[80]—a problem of scale.

Higasa-chan had said something like this, but in the end, it was people that forgave, and people that were forgiven—and it was people that apologized and were apologized to. It might be against the spirit of the law to change your standards depending on the other person, but even the law has room to consider extenuating circumstances.

It's even why there's the clichéd phrase of "giving off a bad impression"—not even I would forgive everyone and anyone that stapled my inner cheek with a stapler.

"Indeed. You could only forgive Senjougahara-san because she was a closed-off young lady."

"No, that's wrong."

"But if a brawny and rough-looking rugby player that was two meters tall and weighed over two hundred kilograms were to staple your inner cheek with a stapler, would you be able to forgive him, Araragi-san?"

"Um, on the contrary, that's a situation where I have no choice but to forgive him…"

I'd probably have to end up forgiving him while forcing some weird smile.

But, with that in mind, then it was true that the numerous behaviors that Senjougahara Hitagi placed on the chopping block at the start of the year were indeed barbaric acts that necessitated formal apologies—and I didn't want to say it, but I was probably only able to forgive her because, well, I loved her. Whether or not that barbaric nature of hers was included in what I loved was, of course, another matter entirely.

"To think there would come a day when Araragi-san would speak of love. They sure do teach a lot of things at university, don't they?"

"It's not like I learned about love at university. I learned about love, primarily, from young girls."

"That's quite the problem—but that's exactly it."

"Um… What exactly about young girls do you mean?"

"Not young girls, but love."

Hachikuji paused for a moment, then continued.

"#5. Pushing boundaries."[81]

"...Pushing boundaries?"

Ah, it's the fifth possibility for the apologies. The word didn't seem to have any connection at first, so it didn't click at first, but… Pushing boundaries was something I'd heard before, wasn't it? It wasn't knowledge from studying… Uh… Did it have to do with parenting?

"That's right. As expected of a specialist in child abuse."

"Will I never be able to peel that label off of me?"

That sticker that was being used to seal classified information?

Then, rather than apologizing for her past actions, I wanted Oikura to apologize in real time for that. Of course, I would forgive her in the end—goodness, if it was pushing boundaries, then what Oikura and Hitagi were doing was exactly that.

"When we'd just met, I used to playfully bite at you, right, Araragi-san? That's another easy-to-understand example of pushing boundaries."

"No, that's wrong. That wasn't playful biting, that was serious biting. You were trying to bite my finger off."

I'd completely forgotten about that battle, but now that I'd been reminded of it, I wanted her to apologize for it… I really hadn't done anything wrong when she bit me, you know?

But minds could change.

And the law could be changed, as well… Legal reform.

"So basically, it's like apologizing because you want to receive forgiveness? It sounds obvious when I put it like that, but after intentionally acting out and being unreasonable, you can really feel the love from the other party when they forgive you—"

"When you think of it like that, doesn't it make sense for them to bring up old disagreements and make completely haphazard apologies? The idea is that they're going to be forgiven anyway, so if they're going out of their way to apologize for something that they would be forgiven for, then they must be doing it because they want to be forgiven. Receiving forgiveness for the sake of entertainment, or pleasure."

Considering the sincerity with which they would test one's love, calling it entertainment or pleasure was clearly mocking it too much—especially for acts that were a kind of self-acknowledgement, or self-actualization, using others as a barrier.

If we apply this to the case of Boyfie-kun, then it would be that he intentionally went for such a blatant apology for something that wasn't night-crawling, or at least something that Meniko didn't consider night-crawling, because he knew the game was rigged towards his forgiveness. In other words, he was waiting for Meniko's reply that "they were making love".

A reaffirmation of their love.

If that was the case, then in the end, as a result of Boyfie-kun pushing Meniko's boundaries, she conclusively stopped having feelings for him, which was an ironic yet expected result… There was no one that liked being tested. Even if you loved someone, if they were to continue to perpetuate such things, then you'd surely get tired of it eventually.

And it was the same for me.

If Senjougahara Hitagi had continued to remain a verbally-abusive character that brandished a stapler, then there was no guarantee that I wouldn't think, "Enough already, I can't keep dating you like this."

I wasn't a saint, after all. If anything, I was an unholy being.

"The desire to be forgiven can thus be fairly strong. However, you may rest easy. This Hachiku-*jin* will forgive all those worldly desires."

"It feels like that's crossed from being godlike into becoming whispers of the devil."

"So, Araragi-san, please forgive this devilish little me."

"That's codependence!"

But if she had said that forgiving someone was like entertainment or pleasure, then I might be inclined to agree… I couldn't deny that it felt good to act like a generous person of high caliber. And maybe forgiveness as a form of asserting dominance could fall under #1. Asymmetrical warfare… You often hear about abusive relationships where one side commits a ton of violence and then tearfully apologizes for it afterwards, but I could imagine that the

situation was pretty tangled up in that respect.

And it was a huge problem if it seemed as though they were messing around in a lovers' quarrel, but the trouble between Meniko and Boyfie-kun was even a step further away from that.

So, to look back on Great Detective Ougi-chan's theories,

#1. Asymmetric warfare

#2. Self-punishing tendencies

#3. Self-sacrifice

#4. Chain of command

#5. Pushing boundaries

It would be those five… Hmm.

Though Ougi-chan had estimated it as having a low probability, personally, the most likely one seemed like the oddity-related #4… But even so, it wouldn't be strange for some other components to be intertwined, so it wasn't as simple as bubbling that in on an answer sheet… It wasn't like Senjougahara Hitagi, Oikura Sodachi, and Boyfie-kun had any noteworthy points in common between each of their cases.

The missing link, so to speak.

"Are you sure these cases are limited to only the three names you mentioned? Fortunately, myself included, I haven't seen any of this town's residents display any similar tendencies, but it's possible, contrary to expectations, that these apologizing symptoms have started to spread here and there at your university. What if Manase University became Ayamarase University…?"[82]

"Unusually for you, that's not very clever… Don't make poor jokes with people's universities' names."

"This is just another example. By intentionally making a boring pun and having you forgive me with a forced smile, I wanted to reaffirm my worth."

Weren't you just forcibly making an example out of it because the joke didn't land?

But still, it was true that boring puns and extremely sarcastic jokes had an aspect of pushing boundaries to them… I'd already brought up her verbal abuse, but couldn't Hitagi's reckless, innocent-feigning wit also be one example?

"...But y'know, I don't like it. I really don't like it. If I had to say it, I don't like that we have to come up with a theory with this level of detailed psychological analysis for a mere, 'I'm sorry.' It feels like nitpicking at the molecular level."

"If I made you feel that way, it was because I was inadequate. If I were to apologize like that, it would be #3. Self-sacrifice, I suppose? Of course, Ougi-san would have been able to explain the nuances better."

"You sure are showing a weird amount of faith in Ougi-chan."

If it were Ougi-chan, I would think he would give a much more unpleasant explanation of #5. Pushing boundaries. Perhaps he himself was aware of that, and so he adjusted the speed of his bicycle accordingly to leave the explanation to Hachikuji.

"Then, would you like to finally start telling me about what kind of oddity the *ayamarei* is? From the favorite to win, #4. Chain of command. I have to go soon, you see."

"You have to go? My, my. From where are you leaving, and to where are you headed?"

"I'm leaving this town to go to university…"

You're just making me say it out loud, huh.

What a nasty leading question.

"What, did you not hear about the nature of the oddity?"

"No, no, I've heard it. However, Ougi-san never said that #4 was the favorite to win."

I knew that, but it would be a problem if it was anything else… Our breakup, which had been put on hold, might actually come into effect.

Even if it wasn't the favorite to win, my life was still on the line.[83]

So I had no choice but to push the conversation forward, little by little.

"It's definitely a 'favorite to win' that you wouldn't want to gamble on."

"Shut up. I've bet on #4. So what kind of animal is this *ayamarei*? Is it a crab, or a snail, or a monkey… Or a snake, or a cat? Or even a bee, or a cuckoo…"

"The *ayamarei* isn't an animal. It's not even a living being."

"Hmm… Then is it like a vampire, or a corpse?"

If it was in that strength-based category, then we might actually be able to deal with it… But it was because that wasn't the case that I had come all the way back to my hometown and was enduring all your snide remarks.

"As a matter of fact, even before Ougi-san spoke to me about it, I had already been aware of the *ayamarei*. When I'd been undergoing my godly training under Gaen-san, it was something that was taught to me as part of her curriculum."

"Is that so? Then, is it something like a god?"

If so, that was pretty tough.

There was the line of thought that all oddities were a kind of god, though.

"Among the oddity stories that you've experienced, Araragi-san, the closest one would be neither a demon nor a corpse, nor even

a god, but the ‘Darkness’.”

“The ‘Darkness’—”

“So, Araragi-san, you were more correct than you were thinking when you came to visit Ougi-san… Out of a score of 100, you get 120 points. But, depending on how you look at it, it can be even nastier than the Darkness.”

He had said something like that.

That not even a vampire could contend against it—

“The *ayamarei* is a command. It is quite literally an order, and an ordinance.”

“An ordinance?”

“Yes. Like debt relief ordinances[84], or the Ordinances on Compassion for Living Things.[85]”

In the sense that they both didn’t exist, it was like a ghost.

A restricted, shared illusion in our present-day constitutional state.

“—If someone were to give me such a command, would even a hopeless person like me be able to obediently apologize?

“If I were to be compelled.

“Then obediently, or perhaps, reluctantly.

“Unwillingly, or maybe, graciously.

“Would I be able to apologize?

“Like how I need an excuse to forgive when I’m forgiving someone, I’d like to have an excuse to apologize when I’m apologizing. And it wasn’t just me, as I’m sure any twisted person would truly feel the same.

“On the topic of shogi players, when it comes to the fact that they have to admit defeat when they don’t see a way forward, but that wasn’t because all shogi players were obedient, or because all shogi players were gracious losers. It was simply because that was the custom.

“That was how it was legislated.

“So, even if you might be writhing with frustration, even if you don’t want to admit defeat at all, even if you can’t accept the difference in your abilities, even if you believe that ‘There must still be a way,’ you can still say, ‘I’ve lost.’

“You can accept your own loss.

“And forgive yourself for doing so.

“You can think that you don’t feel as though you’ve lost, but you have to because it’s the rules.

“It’s like a form of mediation. Even with an inflexible custom, the more clearly it’s defined, the easier it is to follow.

“Even when told to decide for themselves if they should apologize or not, there will be people that would rather not apologize when deciding for themselves. And for those people, they’ll want an excuse for apologizing.

“They know that it’s better to apologize.

“They just don’t know what the right way to apologize is—and I’d like to confess that I often find myself with the intrusive thought that, rather than just not wanting to apologize, I feel like I shouldn’t be apologizing.

“I very much understand that it makes no sense, but I get this premonition that if I were to apologize there, I’d end up losing something important to me—perhaps my pride, perhaps my dignity, or perhaps something even more important.

“To put it in a weird way, then yes, it felt like I might lose people’s trust in me—if I apologized, I might be able to get through

for the time being, but I couldn't help but feel that it would come back to bite me in the future.

"For the sake of getting through it, I had to endure it.[86]

"Even though it was actually the opposite. If I didn't apologize immediately, I'd miss the timing to do so, and I'd regret it for the rest of my life—like how I could no longer apologize for the thoughtless words I'd said to my mother.

"How nice would it have been if there had been some figure to harshly rebuke me and tell me, 'Apologize to your mother'—well, not someone, but.

"If that sort of spirit existed in the law, how many could it have saved?—at the very least, my mother would have been saved.

"I, too, would have been saved.

"Apologizing is not something people should be compelled to do.

"An apology not given by one's own volition is meaningless—and perhaps that's true. But if it's the law that defines what is wrong, then according to the principle of 'no punishment without law', shouldn't it also be the law that provides the solution?"

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And so, I'd had my fill of the appointment-less trip to my hometown, but it turned out that there being a huge difference between doing something and having it be done to you was not just limited to the dichotomy of receiving and causing harm. When I returned to Manase University by car, I was suddenly called out to by someone with no prior arrangements, making me realize how much of an inconvenience it was to be unwillingly and unexpectedly stopped in my tracks.

Then again, while it may have been sudden, it was a little wrong to say it was unexpected… It was also hard to say it was unwilling. For the sake of actively continuing this apology-related investigation, this was a person I would have to interview at some point, but even if that weren't the case, this was a person that had come to see me—of course, in order to apologize.

"Araragi-kun? Do you have a moment?"

It was a good-looking guy.

Well, or should I say it was a guy that had once been good-looking?

I could imagine that, if it was a short while ago, perhaps even a few days ago, he would have been a fair, rosy-cheeked pretty boy, but his hair was a mess, his eyes were hollow with dark circles, his cheeks were sunken, and he was even sporting stubble… And for his fashion, if you could even call that fashion, was basically just his sleepwear.

He was in such a state that it made me wonder if he came to school through some secret underground tunnel… Even when he lived in a leaky abandoned building, that Hawaiian-shirt guy could be considered neat and tidy in comparison.

"I wanted to apologize—for Hamukai-san."

"……"

Basically, this pretty boy, or former pretty boy, was that Boyfie-kun that Meniko had talked about… Now that he'd finished apologizing to everyone from within the club research club, he had finally come looking for the outsiders. I was overjoyed that I was considered Meniko's friend. At least, I was glad it wasn't just my assumption.

A related party.

And the perpetrator.

I'd intended to visit him myself at some point, but with him being the one to visit me, there was the distinct feeling of being sucker-punched… I was kind of amazed at my own laid-back plans to

do more research at the university library after classes.

Meniko had said that he was in the year above us, but if it weren't for his haggard, unshaven appearance, he would look fairly young for a university student… He certainly didn't look like the kind of person that would commit night-crawling, but aha, this was the kind of guy Meniko liked.

Someone who didn't look like he was older…

Speaking of which, even that guy from the light music club was baby-faced.

As a specialist in child abuse, it was a bit of a concerning trend, but putting that aside… What was the right way to respond in this situation?

#1. Who are you?

#2. Who's Hamukai-san?

#3. Who's Araragi-kun?

"Who's Araragi-kun?"

I ended up picking choice #3, but it seemed he'd conducted a preliminary investigation, as he said, "No, I get it! I'm sure you don't want to speak to me, Araragi-kun," ignoring me entirely.

And, not caring about everyone around him, he said,

"I'm so sorry, Araragi-kun! I've ended up turning your precious close friend into damaged goods![87] Please, hit me! I want you to hit me!"

and vigorously bowed his head—with a vigor that made him look like he was headbutting the ground.

So I'd made it as far as her close friend.

"No need to hold back! If you want, you can wring my neck! I've already written my last will, so you won't be charged for any crimes, Araragi-kun!"

Of course I'd be charged, no matter what kind of will you wrote.

But this wasn't the time to be throwing around criminal law… But, perhaps fortunately enough, my discussion with Hachikuji had taken longer than I'd expected, and because I'd arrived appropriately late to my university class, there weren't a lot of people around… A scene where a worn-out upperclassman was bowing his head to me was guaranteed to be awkward.

Like public humiliation…

"Um, shall we at least go somewhere else? Uh…"

I hadn't asked for his name yet, had I?

"I have no name. I no longer have the qualifications to refer to myself with my parents' name, or the name my parents gave me. If you have to call me something, you can call me trash."

"…Haha."

I see. He was being quite theatrical.

Even Senjougahara Hitagi had said something about how I should call her Iberian pig… But in his case, it didn't seem like he was joking… His lifeless eyes shined with a weird light.

They gave off a bewitching light—the *ayamarei*.[88]

"Well, I've actually been called trash before. From my girlfriend, at that. Isn't that hilarious?"

As I tried to defuse the situation and move us to a different location, Boyfie-kun grasped my wrist tightly… With a grip strength that made me feel like my wrist would break off.

"I won't let you go, Araragi-kun. Not until you've fully received my apology—not until you've hit me. Not until you've broken my bones and fractured my skull!"

Even with his head bowed, Boyfie-kun's eyes were upturned to stare at me—and his eyes were completely glazed over. It might be meaningless to put "more or less" here, but I was more or less a former vampire, so I was capable of shaking him off with brute force, but his intensity made him seem as though he would not allow that. If this were #1. Asymmetric warfare, then right now, I was in the losing position. Far from his own skull, it felt like I would be the one to break here.

"…Okay, okay. Then, let's just talk here. Let's talk it out."

As I spoke to calm him down, I immediately put my ex-vampire talents to good use, putting up a barrier to prevent outside interference—now no one would be able to disturb us, or so I would've liked to say, but unfortunately, no such talents remained in the dregs of me.

Rather than a barrier, all I could do was put on airs.

In the first place, I'd never even seen Shinobu put up a barrier before—she had never once cared about receiving unwanted attention. Because she was a king.

So with that, the difficulty rose sharply.

While worrying about my surroundings and without provoking him too much, I had to successfully complete this interview with Meniko's "perpetrator" Boyfie-kun… But what exactly did success mean in this case?

From what I could tell, despite the shabby atmosphere surrounding Boyfie-kun, there were no traces of him having become a target of violence… There were no plasters or bandages or bruises or bumps. Even though he must have gone around saying the same thing to all the members of his club, it seemed nobody had actually gone and hit him… Well, that made sense.

Who would actually hit him in this situation?

Would you really do something to his skull?

It also felt like he was being deliberate in apologizing dramatically in a public space… Someone shrewd might even say that, by stubbornly refusing to go somewhere else, he was trying to avoid being taken somewhere with no one around and actually getting hit.

Perhaps he'd even made himself look that way on purpose… Intentionally messing up his hair, putting on special-effects makeup for panda-like eyes and a gaunt-looking face, and diligently growing out his stubble… As though trying to appear as hard-to-hit as possible.

Was it just groundless suspicion?

Well, if it was the old Senjougahara Hitagi, she would have gone ahead and hit him with plenty of composure (in fact, she had actually gone and hit Oikura before with all her classmates watching, which had become quite a problem), so the fact that he'd come to me out of all of Meniko's friends outside her circle could have been strategic, in a way.

If he was apologizing to me, who was so kind and harmless, then perhaps he was using the strategy of #5. Pushing boundaries…

"Maybe so. Never in his wildest dreams would the lad think that he was bowing his head to a harmless, pedophilic, kidnapping, incestuous, child-seat-obsessed bastard."

I felt like I'd heard an incredible description of some super dreadful criminal being spoken from my shadow, but this was probably just an appeal to me to say, "If push comes to shove, I'll make my appearance!" It was quite dependable of her, but your time to shine will be a little later.

For now, stay hungry in the comfort of your own space.

"Now! Araragi-kun! Hit me! I won't rest until you hit me! If I could be forgiven by killing myself, I would gladly do so, but that wouldn't satisfy Meniko at all! Meniko wants an even harsher punishment for me!"

Even if it had been just a day earlier, I was glad to have heard from Meniko in advance… Thank goodness for that test prep. It was a good learning experience. If a former pretty boy completely unconcerned about his appearance had come at me without me knowing anything about the situation, I would've surely been overwhelmed.

It was even possible that I, being the good-natured person that I was, would have taken his words at face value… It was already dangerous to take the words of a perpetrator at face value, but even more so when no crime had even been perpetrated.

"If you ask me, Meniko…"

"Meniko has nothing to do with this! This is a matter between me and you, Araragi-kun! I don't want to hurt Meniko any further!"

Despite having been the one to bring her up, he was rattling on

as though overcome with violent emotion… It was quite a theatrical outburst of emotion.[89] Putting aside if I hadn't heard in advance, even now, when I *had* heard in advance, this was quite terrifying.

Being poor at Japanese as I was, my descriptive ability may be lacking, so if the state of Boyfie-kun came across as amusing or even comical in any way, then I truly apologize.

Because at the current moment, I was experiencing nothing but fear.

If I could be forgiven for doing so, then I would be fleeing from here as fast as possible—if I could be forgiven. But that was not forgivable.

Even more so today, after I'd recalled my high-schooler self after a brief visit back home.

I couldn't let him underestimate me.

I was not a harmless, pedophilic, kidnapping, incestuous, child-seat-obsessed bastard—I was someone that even reconciled with a vampire. It's quite amazing that you would try to talk things out with someone like me.

Meniko had stopped me from doing so, but if that's your wish, then it's inevitable.

I'll wrestle with you in this ring without holding back.

"All right. I'll hear you out."

After telling Boyfie-kun that, I sat down right there, right on the ground—it was a declaration of intent to not budge one bit until we came to an agreement. Plus, my trembling knees wouldn't be able to be seen once I sat down.

Get ready.

I'll talk things out with you until you cry and apologize.

"I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it—though I might actually die."

My line of sight had gotten lower, and since Boyfie-kun had been constantly bowing his head, it was like I was looking at his expression face-to-face. And, with me having sat down without worrying about what others might think, Boyfie-kun was making a face as though he had received the great shock of, "He sat down before me"... Perhaps he had made a plan to prostrate himself when the timing was right.

If that was the case, sorry for you.

As someone who'd prostrated himself for an entire night to a golden-haired young girl, I was one step ahead of you—against this early-morning surprise attack, I'd finally managed to get a counterattack in. A counterattack that didn't involve actually hitting him.

But this was only the beginning.

“If you’re okay with me, I’ll hear you out—don’t think too badly of me.”

“Of course, the law isn’t all-powerful.

“It’s full of holes, and loopholes.

“Riddled with holes.

“I’ve already mentioned how, depending on the person interpreting, it can be interpreted however they want, but before that, since the law wasn’t unchangeable, it wasn’t absolute.

“If anything, a constitutional government was worse than a lawless zone.

“There existed all sorts of situations where you had no choice but to comply with rules that you wanted to avoid looking at, and just because they existed, that didn’t mean you approved.

“Being forced to give an insincere apology definitely had to be humiliating—however, even without holding any feelings of gratitude towards life or ingredients, you might readily say ‘Thanks for the food’ upon sitting at the table, without resistance and with no intention of lying, because that’s how it’s been passed down in tradition.

“And ‘it was delicious’ is just etiquette, I suppose.

“Even if you’re not grateful, you’ll say ‘thank you’, and even if you don’t feel bad, you’ll say ‘sorry’.

“It might even make you feel as though you’re doing something good—if you’re aware that you’re following the rules or doing the right thing, is that uplifting?

“Instead of apologizing because you did something bad.

“You apologize because it’s the right thing to do.

“Apologizing is the right thing to do, so I am in the right.

“If anything, thanks for letting me apologize.

“It’s an extremely positive form of self-esteem—denying or criticizing yourself might feel good, but the sense of justice you get from thinking that you’re in the right, that you’re not in the wrong, that it’s not your fault… That can lead to feeling all-powerful.

“The law may not be all-powerful, but it makes us feel all-powerful.

“You may be lowering your head, but inside, you’re puffed up with pride—pride that you have complied with rules of righteousness.

“Even if you apologize, it won’t hurt your pride.

“If you think that way, then it becomes easy to apologize, doesn’t it? If apologizing is more beneficial, then you want to apologize constantly, right?—you wouldn’t be able to go without apologizing.

“You might even start to intentionally make mistakes in order to apologize for them—intentional mistakes. That sounds almost like

Munchausen's syndrome, but getting drunk on justice is dangerous, isn't it?

"For you, who has the girls that were once the Tsuganoki 2nd Middle School Fire Sisters as your little sisters, I'm sure that's something you feel constantly—you should be well aware of the dangers of advocating for justice.

"However, there are people that are unable to apologize without borrowing the power of the dangerous monster of law.

"If you were to say that those people are the real monsters, then I have no words to refute that with—in the same way you have no words to say to me.

"In the same way you have no magic to cast upon me."

“I’m sooo sorry! Koyomi-chan, I’m sooo sorry! In the end, your involvement in this went to the maximum leveeel! I didn’t want this at aaall!”

If Meniko was apologizing to me, it meant I hadn’t been able to achieve any of my goals—however, why was it that, on the way back from the university library (the only plan for today I had actually achieved in carrying out), Meniko was rushing up to me?

Had Boyfie-kun told her? No, no, Meniko should have blocked him on everything already.

“It’s making the rooounds! A picture of Koyomi-chan sitting down on campuuus! With a ‘#sittingkoyomi’ hashtaaag!”[90]

“‘#sittingkoyomi’!?”

Weren’t they just making fun of me?

It seemed someone was about as clever as that elementary school fifth-grader.

“No need to worry. When I get serious, I can’t get captured on camera.”

“I-it’s true that the image was a bit blurry, I gueeess?”

Even in the midst of her confusion, Meniko was battering at my body with her palms—I was wondering what emotion that was supposed to be portraying, but it seemed she was just checking to make sure I hadn’t been harmed. I got that she was just concerned for me, but why such a violent physical examination…?

What if I had actually been hurt?

I’d totally thought you were a laid-back girl, unfazed by anything.

“Don’t worry. It was an extremely peaceful conversation with Boyfie-kun.”

“Are you suuure? Boyfie-kun was also kind of blurry in the pictuuure, so doesn’t that mean Boyfie-kun was serious, toooo?”

Hm… The whole thing about getting serious was meant to be a joke, but maybe it was something like that. If Boyfie-kun—if he were acting under orders from the *ayamarei*.

#4. Chain of command.

“Then maybe it’s spirit photography that’s making the rounds…”

“But anyway, I’m sooo sorry! I didn’t want to cause this much trouble for youuu! Please don’t hate meee! I don’t want to lose my closest frieeend! I’m even okay with letting you night-crawl upon me, as long as it’s just ooonce!”

“That wouldn’t make us friends anymore!”

“Will you forgive meee?”

“I forgive you, I forgive you, I forgive you.”

“Thank goodneeess.”

Meniko had nearly been in tears, but she suddenly gave me a wide grin—what a relief. I was plenty exhausted after dealing with Boyfie-kun, so if Round Two were to begin with Meniko here, even I would want to hold back—or at least, those were just my idle complaints. But more importantly, if even Meniko had started to show symptoms of apology poisoning, the hypothesis I’d built up like a stack of building blocks would collapse.

It wasn’t as broad as five hypotheses, much less thirteen hypotheses… The number of hypotheses someone of my caliber could come up with was no more than one.

And that single hypothesis had just narrowly avoided collapse… Heaven forbid.

“Sooo? How did you end up driving away Boyfie-kun, or rather, Ex-Boyfie-kun, anywaaay?”

“I just had a heart-to-heart with him. Thinking about it, that was what I’d been taught from the start.”

“Taaaught? From whooo?”

“From a Hawaiian-shirt guy.”

In fact, that Hawaiian-shirt guy had said this.

If we can’t talk, there’s only war.

In that sense, was it more dangerous for me, or for Boyfie-kun? —it was asymmetric warfare.

Although, I could say that there was a golden-haired young girl, who could even destroy the world if something happened to me, sharpening her fangs in my shadow, so perhaps calling it a life-or-death negotiation was not an exaggeration.

But anyway, how much should I tell Meniko now?—I didn’t want to connect Meniko to Hitagi or Oikura, but I’d only begun looking into this after having run into those three similar instances…

However, after having faced off with Boyfie-kun today, there were still individual characteristics that each case held. In Senjougahara Hitagi’s case, her apology was given with a calmness that reminded me of her past composure, and in Oikura’s case, it was just that her words had become the exact opposite, and she displayed the same hysteria that I was used to seeing—Boyfie-kun’s theatrical emotions were different in type and tendency from the other two.

Even if they receive the same command.

The pattern could change based on the person carrying it out, huh?

It wasn’t as though those people had become oddities themselves…

Well, there was still something like that… Because I'd experienced Hitagi and Oikura in advance—in other words, because I'd undergone that tough special training in advance—I was able to lay a decent foundation against Boyfie-kun, even if it had been a surprise attack.

Not to mention, there was also the fact that it was harder when it was someone I knew.

"Well, there's no need to worry anymore."

After much indecision, I ended up just telling her the conclusion—I was reluctant to keep secrets from my friend, but I decided to just make myself look cool here.

That was the kind of guy I was.

"Boyfie-kun probably won't show himself to you ever again."

"…? Is that sooo?"

Meniko was giving me a doubtful look, but she didn't inquire any further—that sense of distance made her seem like a college girl who'd never had her boyfriend be the one to break things off.

Though if it were me, I'd be clinging to them.

"Apparently, he's already quit the club, too. Perhaps there might be some near-misses on campus or in class, but he'll ignore you. Boyfie-kun and I made that promise between men."

"So I'll be ignooored, huuuh."

Meniko made an expression as though that in itself was regrettable, but she said, "Well, that's fiiine. I only thought for a little bit that I wanted him to quit the university entirelyyy."

Apparently, she'd only thought that for a little bit. Well, that was understandable.

"But a promise between men, huuuh? That's pretty cooool."

"That's right. Araragi Koyomi is pretty cool."

Although the true state was the complete opposite.

Araragi Koyomi was only trying to look cool, so he couldn't actually be cool, and before that, Boyfie-kun and I had not even made a promise between men—after thoroughly talking it out and listening to everything Boyfie-kun had to say, in the end, I couldn't say everything was resolved with that.

It may have been peaceful, but what was actually established was a brute-force peace treaty.

That couldn't be called a promise.

That—was a command.

"And that's what makes it #4. Chain of command, I suppose? Basically, if they'll take orders from one person, they'll take orders from another."

"? What are you talking abooout?"

"The Three Laws of Robotics or something."

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and an oddity for an oddity.

And a command for a command—though it wasn't like I had a strategy.

However, I'd laid the foundation—returning to my hometown that day and speaking with Ougi-chan by chance was a mighty fine play that would otherwise have been unthinkable for me.

The idea that Boyfie-kun or Hitagi or Oikura were being forced to apologize by some external influence was an idea that could have never come from me—even if it was rooted in an oddity, I would only have been able to link that thread to the hypothesis that it came from their own reasoning. For better or for worse, I had too much faith in the individuals' own wills. You could even say it was the flip side of them being weak-willed.

That was my mistake.

Thus, I was weak.

However, if Boyfie-kun and the others were lacking in the "self" that was needed for #2. Self-punishing tendencies or #3. Self-sacrifice, when continuing to repeat their apologies, then it would be meaningless no matter how much persuading or heart-to-hearts there were—because their hearts were openly empty[91], and what really needed persuading was the puppetmaster pulling the strings behind them.

Those threads were rooted to a different location.

"Are you talking about AI, theeen? Like, how would a computer respond if given a command that contradicts an earlier ooone?"

It was a little outside of her area of expertise, but it seemed it was something Meniko had thought about: "Usuallyyy, the later command would take precedence, riiight," she said.

"The law where going second is superiooor. It's not a very versatile one, thoooough. But, is that really the case? What if it simply adhered to the first command, insteaaad?"

"You can also give it the command to ignore commands from anyone else—but, well, even if it seems stubborn, it's actually pretty flexible."

Well, rather than flexible, it was simple because it was stubborn.

Since Boyfie-kun had exhausted himself to his limits after that thorough discussion, it was true that it had been the best possible timing (the stamina of a vampire was inexhaustible), but even if not for that, I'm sure my "command" would still have been accepted.

After all—it was the royal edict of a king.

The King of Oddities.

"...But this kind of thing probably wouldn't work against Hitagi or Oikura. It probably wouldn't be structured so that they'll accept commands from the target of the apology."

Ultimately, it was because I was a completely unrelated third party in the problem between Meniko and Boyfie-kun that I could give that "command"—plus, even though I didn't want to worry Meniko any more, this couldn't be a fundamental solution.

In the end, it was just a temporary solution, like palliative care.

I had only succeeded in overwriting the input, but if Boyfie-kun were to receive another command from #4. Chain of command, then we'd be right back where we started, a pointless back-and-forth.

The overwriting would be overwritten.

It may have been a command using the name of the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, but if anything, it was the authority of a mere shadow of that… In the sense that I was riding on the coattails of an authority with no real backing, there would be no second chance for me.

Ougi-chan had said as much.

Not even a vampire could contend against the *ayamarei*.

And in addition, it wasn't even a good solution for Boyfie-kun—I'd likened him to a robot to make things easy to understand, but naturally, human beings were not robots. Overwriting his commands could make him fall into a contradictory double bind… Well, considering how much of a nuisance the "apologies" undergone by Meniko were, I did also feel that Boyfie-kun should suffer a little bit to balance things out, but I couldn't leave him like that forever.

For a more fundamental solution, rather than reaching out to and dealing with each individual case, I needed to find the one pulling the strings and cut them off at the root—if even an evil law was a law, then I needed to enact legal reform.

"Buuut, in any case, thanks a bunch, Koyomi-chaaan. I dunno what'll happen from now ooon, but for now, you've been a huge heeelp. I'm really really really really gratefuuul!"

"It makes me uncomfortable to be thanked that much, though. Really really really really uncomfortable. It was just that I happened to take on that role. I simply did what anyone could have done."

It was really all thanks to Shinobu's influence, so it was easy to profess my modesty, but Meniko continued, "No, no, it's all because it was you, Koyomi-chaaan," refusing to give in.

"It's because you were the one to tell him, Koyomi-chaaan, that Ex-Boyfie-kun obediently listeeened."

"……Hm?"

There was a weird emphasis to that.

Was it because Meniko thought of me as that much of a reliable man? If so, it was a little embarrassing. To be honest, I didn't remember making myself seem all that capable in front of her, though…

I'd only shown how incapable I was, specifically incapable at studying.

"Even after bearing the brunt of all the ferocious faces of the club research club, it was completely useleeess. You really can't beat regional connections, huuuh."

"There are ferocious faces in the club research club?"

What kind of a club is that.

Or rather… Regional connections?

"Meniko, what do you mean by regional connections?"

"Hmmmm? Was I delayed in telling you?"[92]

She tilted her head as though feigning innocence.

"Boyfie-kun, like Koyomi-chan, is an alumnus of Naoetsu High, you knooow? Didn't you talk things out with him because you knew that?"

said Meniko.

"…I hadn't heard."

No.

I'm sure you already know him—was what she'd said before.

She'd said it before, but in that case—the story changes completely.

This discussion changes completely.

“Compared to someone having no ill will, it’s more of a nuisance for someone to have no self-awareness—in short, rather than not thinking that they “did something wrong”, it would be that they weren’t thinking that they “did it at all”. And in that case, they really wouldn’t even know what to apologize for.

“It may have caused harm, it may have been a nuisance, but I was still in the right, so I had no choice but to do so—if they at least held that principle, then it could be a premeditated crime, with them acting out some picaresque novel.

“However, they didn’t think they ‘did something right’ or ‘did something wrong’—but for a superior person that states, ‘I didn’t do anything at all’, I would need to rack my brains to figure out how to demand an apology from them.

“If you were saying you ‘didn’t do anything’ in the sense that you failed to fulfill your obligations imposed by the law, then of course that was reason to be reprimanded, but for a good-for-nothing who didn’t even commit that sort of violation, how was I to explain to them that their lack of self-awareness was the real problem?

“They don’t want people to get mad at them, so they don’t do anything.

“That’s how they think—they don’t want people to get mad at them, so they hold no ideology.

“Of course, it would be because such a superior person claimed to be an unrelated spectator that they could act as a third party—like how no judge or jury was allowed to judge a perpetrator related to them, or take charge of a case that they were involved in.

“If the people enforcing and executing the law were related parties, the public would absolutely not agree to that—if that were to happen, it could result in exceptions to the law, so even if there was no such thing as a truly unrelated third party, we should still uphold appearances.

“There’s the small world theory that people are connected by five degrees of separation, but how much of a relationship is needed to be considered a related party?

“Even you.

“Have thought of things as ‘someone else’s problem’, right?

“Even when you poked your nose into someone else’s affairs, it was always because some calamity had befallen your lover or friend or childhood friend, right?

“You wanted to act as the judge.

“Or you wanted to play the role of the detective.

“But, it didn’t end up being that way… Even the famous Araragi Koyomi, if you trace back the connections, was impartially—equally in the eyes of the law—the same sort of related party, who was nobody special.[93]

“Even a judge can be dragged down to the defendant’s seat, after all.”

“Though this was my first-choice university that I’d studied frantically to get accepted into, that underclassman famous for being the biggest dropout in the history of Naoetsu High managed to enroll without a care in the world, huh. Rumor has it, his aim was just to be with a girl. Well, it’s not my place to complain, but I dunno, I’d like for him to apologize a little.”

That was apparently what Boyfie-kun had said before.

It was pretty awful to hear that people were talking about me like that without me even knowing, and also that they were saying that I was the biggest dropout in the history of Naoetsu High, and especially that my aim was just to be with a girl. But thanks to that, the mystery was solved.

Like synapses linking up.

The missing link had been found.

Or rather, the pattern had been the one where there had been so much information that it had confused me… If I hadn’t heard about Boyfie-kun's aggressive apologizing from Meniko, I would have simply looked for the commonality between Hitagi and Oikura. Well, actually, in that case, I might have just treated Hitagi’s New Year’s greetings-like breakup and Oikura’s ambush-like prostration[94] as separate things without connecting them… In the first place, Oikura had dropped out of Naoetsu High (or had she just transferred schools?), so that childhood friend of mine didn’t even feel like a fellow alumnus of my dear old alma mater.

Perhaps I would’ve only seen them as “people around me”... However, now that I’d discovered that the random variable of Boyfie-kun had actually been one of my high school upperclassmen, it was obvious what the point in common was.

They were alumni of Naoetsu High. Or those that would call themselves such.

And, at present, they were enrolled in Manase University.

Honestly, for me… For me, who was supposedly the biggest dropout in the history of Naoetsu High, I had never joined any clubs, so I had barely formed any senior-junior relationships while I was enrolled there.

And, without even needing to discuss the aforementioned Oikura-chan, the circumstances were the same for Senjougahara Hitagi, who had acted as the closed-off young lady during her first and second years… Well, in the case of that closed-off young lady that was full of precaution, she might have shrewdly gotten a handle on the personal information of every student in the school, but a one-way

relationship was the same as no relationship at all.

There would be no awareness of being a related party.

In other words, if any relationship would have formed between those three, it would not have been during high school, but almost certainly during their campus life at Manase University—I'd taken quite the detour, but after figuring out this much, I may as well have already arrived at the correct answer.

There definitely had to be a LINE group chat of all the Naoetsu High graduates that didn't include me—well, Oikura wasn't even a graduate, so the new mystery was why only I had been excluded, but that was something I could think about later tonight while crying into my pillow…

"Meniko. I'd like to know the history of Boyfie-kun's actions. Outside of the club research club, were there any major events that he took part in on campus? Something related to international relations… Or mathematics?"

Logically speaking, it would have been better if I could hear from my direct acquaintances, Hitagi or Oikura, but unfortunately, it would be impossible to hold a conversation with those two, considering I was the target of their apologies—well, Meniko and Boyfie-kun would similarly be unable to hold a conversation, but there was a higher chance that he'd heard something before all this happened.

"Hmmm? Unlike me, I don't think Ex-Boyfie-kun was in more than one club, thooough?"

"Is that so… Then, maybe they were in the same class…"

Even if they were in different years and departments, it was possible for them to take the same class… But it didn't seem to click. And it was hard to believe that there was a class that only former students of Naoetsu High were taking—though I hadn't fit in at all, Naoetsu High was still quite the prestigious private high school, so maybe there was something like an alumni association.

"Aaaah, now that you say thaaat? It was a bit different from a club or associatiooon, but around the end of last yeeear? Before winter breeeak, I think Boyfie-kun said something about thaaat?"

Back when we were still lovey-doveyyy?

Well, I didn't care when their honeymoon period was, but if it was before winter break, then that fit perfectly into the chronology. Although, it was possible that he had simply been badmouthing me…

Had they met as a trio to enthusiastically badmouth me?

The biggest dropout in the history of Naoetsu High, was it?

I had never really been conscious about what others thought of me when I was in high school, but now that I was hearing about all this, it was pretty difficult to bear.

It was one thing to say it myself, and I could handle hearing it from people I knew, but hearing it from complete strangers was tough. It was a shock to my mentality.

And it was hard to refute.

I mean, it wasn't like my grades had ever been the lowest within the school, so it was true that I didn't deserve to be talked about like that, but what really put me at a loss for words was what came after that evaluation… "I'd like for him to apologize a little."

Aha.

It was true that, until my third year in high school… More precisely, until June of my third year in high school, before entering university or even entrance exams, I'd been worried I might not be able to graduate.

The exact opposite of Higasa-chan's case.

I'd bet that nobody could have foreseen this future. Not even my parents… With that in mind, in spite of my hellish spring break or my nightmarish Golden Week, I had been extremely fortunate.

Or rather, it was almost as though I'd cheated.

That was how I wanted to confess—that was how I wanted to repent.

But I wasn't talking about how the two brightest minds of Naoetsu High had been in constant attendance as my private tutors to bring up my standard score.

I'd put in the corresponding amount of effort. That, I could be proud of.

However, that effort itself was backed up by ridiculous vampiric powers, and with inexhaustible stamina, a manga-like level of concentration, and an ability to stay completely fine after all-nighters, of course I'd be able to cram as much as I wanted.

If that wasn't unfair, then what was?

Of course, I had my own complaints. During the critical final stretch of winter break, I'd been going and getting killed by a snake god on a daily basis, and even on the morning of the exam itself, I'd fallen head first into hell—but it was hard to classify things into distinctly separate concepts like merits and demerits, and it wasn't something to talk about in terms of simple gain or loss.

But objectively speaking, if it weren't for my vampire constitution, and if my life hadn't become entangled with oddities, then the university student Araragi Koyomi would not exist—he would instead be the held-back-a-year Araragi Koyomi, or even the dropout Araragi Koyomi.

There would be a high probability that I shared a class with Kanbaru or Higasa-chan. With the two of them, whom I would never have become friends with if we'd been in the same year.

It was with all that included that I was who I was now, so I didn't think of it all that negatively… But, at the same time, this was all coming from me alone.

It was personal information, and it was a private matter.

It wasn't as though I lived my life wearing a T-shirt that read "vampire constitution". There was no way that Boyfie-kun would know about the unfairness—or, to put a positive spin on it, the advantages—that I had.

I'd like for him to apologize a little.

It shouldn't have been my place to have to hear something like that… It shouldn't have been, but I remembered my conversation with Higasa-chan.

Just by attending university "without a care in the world", it was possible that it could breed resentment from someone like Boyfie-kun or Higasa-chan… It wasn't like there was something in particular that I wanted to be, and with the reason that "my girlfriend got into this university on a recommendation," I picked a trivial career path like the mathematics department simply because math happened to be my best subject, and not because I wanted to be a mathematician or anything. I wasn't a passionate youth with a high respect for Euler like Oikura was.

For the students that were seriously laboring away day after day, it may have seemed like I was mockingly skipping ahead of them… It would be a misunderstanding, but it made sense why people would misunderstand. Depending on the person, they might even turn delinquent, like Higasa-chan.

Thinking that I was some cheat character that they couldn't possibly imitate…

I've heard that if students that devoted themselves to club activities were to focus on their studies with the same level of motivation after they retire, their grades would improve to an unbelievable extent… Kanbaru might be like that, but that pattern didn't apply in my case.

From an outsider's perspective, it might have seemed as though I was just screwing around… Of course, it wasn't as though Boyfie-kun was seriously fixated on the idea of wanting me to apologize to him.

In the end, it was just a part of idle chatter.

Just a way to vent his stress.

If he had seriously believed it, then he wouldn't have accepted that "command" from me… I'd assumed that, when facing contradictory commands, he chose to obey the one from me because it was a command riding on the coattails of the authority of the "King of Oddities". But to think that it was because I was Boyfie-kun's

delinquent underclassman…

A vampire couldn't contend against it.

But I—was Boyfie-kun's enemy.

Perhaps, in that sense, my high school misconduct ended up helping me out in the end—a lesson like that was worthy of opposition, but in terms of "people can only help themselves," I had unexpectedly put that into practice, hadn't I.

"So, Meniko. What did Boyfie-kun say?"

"The professor asked hiiim, for the sake of the examinees taking exams in Maaarch, can you help out with the final open campus being held this yeeear, or something like thaaat? Even for us, we had something like an alumni visit, riiight?"

"Well, I've never gone to visit alumni before—or rather, I never even went to tour the campus."

"Ahahaaa. Koyomi-chan, you're like a genius, aren't youuu."

If you were saying something like that, it would be the end for Koyomi-chan. It did make me think that humans were a lot like kaleidoscopes, showing lots of different sides to them—but I see, I see.

An open campus… Who would've thought that, instead of Ougi-chan or Hachikuji, it was the chat with Higasa-chan, which I'd thought was the most inconsequential, that ended up actually being foreshadowing?

You never know.

But, an alumni visit, huh?

It was starting to look like I'd have to make a round trip back to my hometown—even though I'd taken great pains to move in next door to Oikura, this wasn't really any different from when I'd been commuting via car.

“I’d like for him to apologize a little.

“It sounds like a trivial demand, but it’s also a request that’s hard to respond to—if anything, it would be easier to react if someone were to say, ‘You don’t need to apologize, so just shut up and drop dead.’

“If it’s a demand made by force, it’s easier to reject, after all.

“Against a person who considers bowing their head and apologizing to be worse than dying, it’s unfair to demand that they apologize.

“It’s not just a difference in enthusiasm.

“Have you ever had something that everyone else does as a matter of course, but you just don’t like it, even though you don’t know why?

“Like you just can’t handle wearing a skirt, or you hate the sound of noodles slurping, or you can’t stand being in groups of four or more, or you hate having your picture taken, or you refuse to get on planes. Everyone has their dislikes that they refuse to compromise on, and when people prod at it, they fall into the trap of thinking, ‘Why can’t you do such a normal thing?’ and treating that dislike as insincerity.

“On the other hand, a demand for an apology can sometimes sound like a pretense—it’ll have the ring of, ‘You’re not going to apologize, anyway,’ and rather than an instigation, it’ll sound more like an expectation.

“Even as they say, I’d like for you to apologize.

“They don’t expect you to apologize, and if you do, they’ll end up thinking of it as an anticlimax—they’ll think that they were getting angry at some nobody who’ll apologize when told to apologize, and they’ll start to worry about their own self-evaluation falling.

“In that sense, wasn’t I quite like a formidable enemy to be vanquished?

“It may be easier to be forgiven if you say you didn’t do it on purpose, but that also means that it was harder for the other side to get angry.

“If it wasn’t intentional, if it was like an accident, and if no one was at fault, then there would be no one to resent in the end—then, what should they do with the stress and frustration that has piled up?

“It wouldn’t just vanish.

“Perhaps that was the reason why stories needed villains—and there were probably cases where the villain didn’t end up apologizing so easily, as a means to make amends to the victim.

“Rehabilitation without rehabilitating.

“Reform without reforming.

“Growth without growing.

“Apologies without apologizing.

“But for that behavior, which neither Araragi Koyomi nor Senjougahara Hitagi, nor Hanekawa Tsubasa nor Oikura Sodachi, was able to carry out, was ‘that man’ able to hypocritically carry it out?”

However, it seemed this would be the last stop for Araragi Koyomi's appointment-less journey—it wasn't exactly the last sentence I desired, and I had a lot of personal feelings about it, but even so, all stories must come to an end. No matter how unintentionally or unwillingly it may be. Laundry must be folded away, even if it was still dirty. It might be a bad end for me, but I'll pray that it was a happy end for someone else.

Though, despite not having made an appointment, I'd at least conducted a preliminary investigation and made preliminary arrangements—I was showing a bit of growth. Among other things, it was necessary to confirm if Hitagi and Oikura had also participated in hosting the open campus, or what Meniko called the alumni visit.

Of course, with the current state of my relationships, it was hard to confirm with them directly, but even if I didn't have any contact with any alumni, that didn't mean there was no one else from Naoetsu High that I could talk to. After exhausting the most delicate of my connections, asking friends of friends of former classmates like some sort of urban legend, I determined that they had indeed participated in the event as the first-year representatives of their departments (Hitagi for the international economy department, Oikura for the mathematics department).

As you may have guessed, it was an event that I hadn't been invited to, but I wasn't complaining. No one would say that Araragi Koyomi was an ideal choice to represent those about to take entrance exams… That guy's exam experience was pointless to hear about. Meanwhile, Hitagi had gotten in on a recommendation, and while Oikura hadn't even graduated from Naoetsu High, having been truant and then transferring schools in quick succession, she had managed to make it to university on a scholarship, so perhaps she was a model case for self-supporting students.

In the first place, with there being a quota for recommendations to national universities, it was safe to say that there was a large pipeline going from Naoetsu High to Manase University—in terms of a missing link that connected those from different years and departments, I probably could have hypothesized from the start that such an event had been held.

But as someone who'd ignored those sorts of factional relationships, I was pretty boneheaded… But with that, I'd found the point in common between those three "apologizers".

Not only that, the few Naoetsu High graduates that were willing to speak to me revealed that things were not in a particularly

pleasant state.

According to some charitable sources of information, among the graduates of Naoetsu High, there were several students that were exhibiting similar symptoms, and the topic had begun to quietly spread through campus—the missing link was connecting more than just Boyfie-kun and Hitagi and Oikura.

The chain was longer than I thought. Like a chain letter.

I didn't do any follow-up surveys, but it seemed that practically every former Naoetsu High student that had participated as hosts in the alumni visit had been spotted launching themselves into apologies—of course, each of them had their individual differences, but it was more than apparent that this was a condition affecting them as a group.

Something had happened at that seminar.

They had encountered something—the former Naoetsu High students.

I didn't want to sound like I was sulking when I said this, but as someone who hadn't participated in the event, hadn't been invited, and in fact hadn't even known of the event until this very moment, it wasn't exactly easy to guess what might have happened at the end of the year—but to that, what Boyfie-kun said ended up being a hint.

I'd like for him to apologize a little.

Perhaps if there was some "proclaimer" that felt such a way after seeing the alumni go into an explanation of campus life after being accepted into university—of course, someone from the side of the exam-taking students that had come to visit.

And among them.

Someone who had lost hope that they would be accepted.

That was the preliminary investigation I'd conducted for my appointment-less journey, and in terms of preliminary arrangements, I placed a call to the semi-regular Higasa-chan—if I was the biggest dropout in the history of Naoetsu High, then she would be the second generation, so if Manase University were her school of choice, then she was in danger of being the prime suspect.

In fact, I'd actually suspected her a little, but Higasa-chan's first-choice school was not Manase University. And in the first place, she'd experienced her setback much earlier, so she hadn't even participated in her first-choice school's open campus towards the end of the year, which was still worrying in its own way.

I'd faced the semi-regular, but she wasn't even the culprit, huh?

"Ah, but, I think I'll be able to find that out pretty quickly. We have a group chat of Naoetsu High dropouts on LINE."

"What an unpleasant alliance…"

“We’re licking each other’s wounds.”

That in itself could make for a decent wound tale, but the fact that he couldn’t make it into that kind of alliance would be what made Araragi Koyomi into Araragi Koyomi. In both high school and university.

But… She’d really said that, huh.

That there were lots of dropouts to be found in Naoetsu High.

Even more so because Naoetsu High was such a university-focused school… I’d thought that I was the only one.

“A third-year that wanted to get into Manase University—a third-year that wanted to get into Manase University, right?”

“Right. Also… It’s only a guess, but she might’ve wanted to enroll in the law department.”

“Gotcha. Just leave it to me! I’ll look into it and text you the details.”

She was securing a position as an informant.

In fact, she was quite the talented informant, and had already sent the following message as I was driving my New Beetle back to my hometown.

“Class 3-1, Jouraku Ochiba.”

“A former member of the track team.”

“She wanted to enroll in Manase University’s history department.”

“She has a bob cut and is on the cute side. She recently made her skirt shorter. Her foot size is 24 cm. She wears Nike Zoom Flys.”

“Her birthday is February 1st. Her blood type is O.”

“Her home address is…”

“Her height is 153 cm, and her weight is 50 kg.”

“Her three sizes are…”

“Her pet name is…”

“The first movie she watched is…”

“Her childhood nickname was…”

She was way too talented as an informant.

I wasn’t trying to answer her security questions.

Skipping over all the information that was too private, I looked over the most important parts—of course, while I was stopped at traffic lights, in order to comply with the law.

Even at red lights, I was taking steps forward.

And finally.

“She’s the type to let grades fall after retiring from club activities (same as me, the burnout-type).”

“She apparently participated in the end-of-year open campus you mentioned, but she’d already changed her first-choice school. (Did she also give up on entrance exams? If so, that’s also the same as me.

Teehee!)"

"Recently, she's been dropping by busy places before going home. She's lost her club friends, so it looks like she's playing by herself until she goes home late by herself, being lonely all by herself."

"So, for this girl with an unstable state of mind, if you would like to ambush her on her way home, please use the attached map as reference…"

Was this junior trying to be some sort of pimp?

I couldn't help but think that Higasa-chan needed a different kind of education (but in another sense, I probably didn't need to worry, because of that talent of hers), but right now, *she* was more urgent—Jouraku Ochiba.

Jouraku Ochiba-chan.

Seeing as I didn't know an upperclassman a year above me, there was no way I would know an underclassman a year below me, but she would be a classmate of Kanbaru and Higasa-chan… Although we may not have had direct contact, the title of "former member of the track team" was worth special mention.

In her eyes.

How would she have seen Senjougahara Hitagi, who was once an ace of the track team in middle school?—whether it was Hitagi or Oikura or Boyfie-kun, after seeing students, who attended the same Naoetsu High that she did, sing praises of their campus life "without a care in the world", what would she have thought?

She surely understood that the open campus was not just a place to boast about the wonders of university life, but even so, she might have ended up thinking that way anyway—if she was a dropout like me.

She might have thought—"I'd like for them to apologize."

"To people like 'me', who have fallen short."

She might have demanded an apology.

…Of course, at this point, it was all just my assumption. There could be tons of other suspects, and there might be a delinquent that didn't, or couldn't, participate in such a mutual-aid-society-like group, like me—but, if so, then I still needed to reach out to Ochiba-chan, if only to lift the suspicion on her.

The problem was no longer something limited to my surroundings… It wasn't just Hitagi and Oikura and Boyfie-kun, but the other graduates of Naoetsu High—when "perpetrators" were being mass-produced for every year and every department, the "*ayamarei*" was going beyond the scope of what could be handled privately among family and friends.

Right now, perhaps things could be resolved as each person's

“eccentricities”, but if the phenomenon of the Naoetsu High graduates fervently apologizing on Manase University’s campus were to be found out by some third-party organization, then in the worst case, the large high-school-to-university pipeline might be broken.

The recommendation quota for next year could be extinguished.

Therefore, unwilling as I was, I had no choice but to follow the recommendation of the pimp, or rather, the informant, and wait in ambush—perhaps I should consider the promotion of Higasa-chan to regular, but who would’ve thought that a dropout like me would end up contributing to my alma mater in such a way?

Should I consider this as something appealing?

Or should I apologize a little for this?

“People change. That goes for anyone.

“They’ll change in mind and they’ll change in body.

“Life is full of vicissitudes, and things are constantly in flux—how long ago was the golden age of the King of Oddities, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, anyway?

“She, who transformed from human to demon, then from demon to young girl.

“Though I like myself as I am now, there are those that prefer who they used to be in the past—from my mother’s perspective, she may have thought that I was the cutest when I was suffering in my sickbed, when I couldn’t do anything or say anything that I wanted to.

“But it’s not just me. It differs for most people.

“That is, how you evaluate yourself, and how others evaluate you.

“When that happens, people often say that you should listen to how others evaluate you, but is that really true? Shouldn’t I know myself the best?

“Isn’t it just that people who don’t even know me are just saying whatever they want?

“Or was it possible that I didn’t actually know myself the best—am I lacking in awareness of who I really am?

“When it comes to artists and creators and musicians, the works from their most popular or highly-evaluated eras are not necessarily the works that they themselves are proud of—and there are plenty of authors that are blatantly disgusted when praised for their ‘sensational’ debut works.

“They blatantly pretend that they’ve ‘forgotten’.

“Like how it sometimes feels that greatest hits albums don’t actually contain the greatest—when they seal away their hit songs or avoid the best-sellers, it’s not just because they’re in search of a new line out of a pioneering spirit, but also because of simple self-denial.

“It’s not just limited to authors—when a person can’t take pride in the objective, numbers-based peak of their life, they speak of that time as though they’re embarrassed or ashamed, but perhaps that feeling of being ‘unable to take pride’ is an approximation of the feeling of being ‘unable to apologize’.

“Like me, that person may want to think that they’re the best they can be right now, so I can understand why they would tend to deny their past selves—it’s an emotion that rivals nostalgia, but it wouldn’t just be limited to that.

“If you wanted to apologize for your past mistakes, it would

first mean you had to acknowledge your past self first, and anyone would understand the fear of having to do so—if you like the way you are right now, then it makes sense to hate the past more than necessary. So, in that sense, the further back something is, the harder it is to apologize for it.

"Being stubborn.

"Even despite the idea of 'time heals all wounds', no matter how much the other party is willing to forgive, it would still be tough for the apologizer to bring things up.

"The one that's most unforgiving of me is myself.

"That's why, I can't apologize.

"That's why, I won't apologize.

"If you were to ask me, then the golden age of Araragi Koyomi was his third year of high school, but I suppose for you, that era would have been hellish and nightmarish, wouldn't it—that's why I think this.

"I even want to say it out loud.

"I'd like to tell you—shouldn't you go on and forgive your past self already?"

“Ochiba-chan, right? Whew, glad I could find you. Your parents asked me to come and pick you up.”

After two hours of waiting with my car parked on the shoulder of the road, I was able to finally roll down the window of the driver’s seat and call out to the high school girl that was walking by while looking at her smartphone.

Jouraku Ochiba-chan.

A Naoetsu High uniform. Short skirt. Bob cut. It couldn’t be anyone else.

It matched up with the information that Higasa-chan had provided me, but she didn’t seem as though she’d gone astray, or even turned into a *gyaru*, in the way the information had made it seem—perhaps that was just the extent of my hometown, but if the limits of her bad behavior was walking while looking at her smartphone, then this town was practically idyllic.

To think I’d left such a good town.

“Now, hop in. Your parents are worried about you.”

From the driver’s seat, I pushed the switch to unlock the door to the back seat—with me essentially trying to wear her down by force, Ochiba-chan slowly raised her head from her smartphone with a doubtful expression before her eyes landed on the child seat that had been installed in the passenger seat.

“……”

And, despite her hesitation, she silently boarded the “car that had come to pick her up”.

It was extremely careless for a high school girl, but if she’d decided to trust me because of the child seat, then that was a fortunate miscalculation… Introducing one’s child or elderly parent was an extremely effective technique used by con men, so perhaps I’d seemed like someone’s parent.

Or perhaps she had just given in to despair… As soon as she sat down in the back seat, she stretched out her legs as a former track team member would do, so perhaps she held a brusque attitude of “whatever happens, happens”. Especially since she immediately returned her attention to the social network game on her smartphone.

“Can you fasten your seatbelt? Also, please turn off your phone in the car. It’s a foreign car controlled by a computer, so using your phone might affect the driving.”

“…? Uh, okay.”

Even though she seemed to be in doubt, the high school girl did as she was told… Fastening one’s seatbelt was within the realm of

common sense, so of course she would follow it, but the fact that I was able to succeed in getting her to turn off her smartphone by pretending it was a similar kind of rule was an unexpected blessing.

Since it would be troublesome if she called for help midway.

Wasn't this also a con man technique, to start from a small yes to draw out a bigger yes? Hm. Well, it was possible that being a con man would be better.

Since what I was doing was complete child abduction… I guess, even after entering university, I was continuing to kidnap underage girls.

My criminal mindset overflowed.

It wasn't something I could just apologize for.

In any case, I stepped on the gas pedal. To get away from there as fast as possible… As I made a right turn at the intersection, I once again confirmed the presence of Ochiba-chan in the back seat using the rear-view mirror.

Honestly, I had no memory of having ever seen this girl when she was a second-year when I was still in high school… After all, I'd only really gotten to know Higasa-chan after graduating, so I basically didn't know any of the second-years outside of Kanbaru.

It wasn't a matter of being acquaintances just by having met them once.

From what I could see, she just seemed like a serious high school girl… I didn't really get the impression of her being a track team member, but maybe that was just because it'd been a while since she retired? She looked surprisingly dainty for an athlete. Perhaps, like astronauts, her arduous studying had caused her muscles to atrophy.

"Did they say anything?"

she said.

Though she'd been silent up until now, she'd finally said something to me in the driver's seat… Eh? Was she talking about the informant?

"My mom and dad. Were they angry at me?"

"Ah. Well, they were worried. After all, the entrance exams are coming up…"

"Haha."

She laughed. Scornfully.

"Entrance exams, huh? There's nothing to worry about, I'll pass all the ones I'm taking. Without overextending myself—unlike you, Araragi-senpai."

She'd struck me right when I'd felt relieved.

Well, just like with Boyfie-kun, just because I didn't know about her didn't necessarily mean that she didn't know about me. Did

that mean that it wasn't the child seat that gained her trust, but my face?

"Did we happen to cross paths in a hallway at some point?"

"Not at all. But I frequently heard your name from the guidance counselor—about the legendary examinee that went from a standard score of zero to getting into a prestigious university."

It made me want to burst into laughter.

A scornful laughter, but at myself.

Being the biggest dropout in the history of Naoetsu High, and being not the legendary vampire but the legendary examinee… The embellishment of these rumors were showing no signs of stopping.

Really, a standard score of zero?

"'You should follow in his footsteps,' the teachers would say—but they shouldn't expect so much from me. But if anything, you're like a reality I'd rather avert my eyes from, Araragi-senpai. My great senior."

"—After meeting the real thing, I don't seem like that much of a big deal, right?"

"I dunno. You're riding in a pretty impressive car, and you've let your hair grow out the way you want like a hippie. It seems my great senior is as free as ever after getting into university. I can't help but admire that."

I could feel her sarcasm through the rear-view mirror.

The only reason I'd grown my hair out was to hide my vampire bite marks, but I didn't think that excuse would pass—and, if I explained that my parents had brought me the car, and it was hard to drive in Japan because the steering wheel was on the left side, it would probably have the opposite effect.

With both of us being dropouts from an elite school, I thought we'd be able to commiserate a bit more, but it seemed she was antagonistic to me… However, I felt the same way about her.

After all, the reason I came to see Ochiba-chan wasn't purely for her sake alone… My reasons were impure, and even boorish. It was for Hitagi's sake, for Oikura's sake, for Meniko's sake, and for my sake, but it wasn't for hers.

"So, were they angry? My mom and dad."

"....."

So she hadn't actually realized I was lying.

She was really just a meek little girl, so it was a bit of an anticlimax… In the sense that she was really concerned about being told off by her parents. Even though in my mind, I'd been treating this as one of my biggest confrontations since I faced off against the three vampire hunters, Dramaturgy, Episode, and Guillotinecutter.

But that wasn't it, huh?

It was closer to my confrontation with Ougi-chan.

The front and the back—even though this girl and I shared the same failure attribute, the timing was a little different… Well, if you asked me, it was an exaggeration to call her a failure just because she lowered the rank of her first-choice school, but she probably didn't want to hear that from me.

"What would you do if they were angry? Apologize?"

"Of course I'd apologize. Sorry for worrying you. Father, Mother, I'm sorry I'm such a stupid daughter."

After saying that, Ochiba-chan actually demonstrated bowing her head in the rear-view-mirror—but it was nothing but a demonstration, as her face was showing a faint smile.

"Araragi-senpai, would you say you're good at apologizing?"

"Hm—to my parents? I don't know about that."

Now that she'd asked me, it didn't really feel like I apologized to them all that much. While we maintained a pretty good relationship at the moment, in my high school days, it had been pretty volatile. Perhaps even now, it was just because we were keeping an appropriate distance between us.

"Not just to your parents. To your teachers or your friends or your girlfriend. To be more specific, not just apologizing, but apologizing and being forgiven—are you good at that?"

"…I would say I'm bad at it, if I had to choose."

That could mean that I'd done a lot of things that I shouldn't be forgiven for, but in my case, there were too many things that I didn't even want to be forgiven for.

The child abduction I was carrying out right now was one of those, and also, the treatment I was about to perform on Ochiba-chan—naturally, I wasn't just driving with the intention of taking her all the way back to her house.

I was heading to a different place.

I could also call it a place I was quite familiar with.

"I'm pretty good at it, you see. Being forgiven. In other words, pretending to apologize."

"Pretending—to apologize?"

Was this what Higasa-chan had mentioned about her basketball club juniors?

The hierarchical relationship of the athletic types was beyond my comprehension.

"Well, to be clear, I don't have any experience in prostrating myself. If anything, that just antagonizes people more. If you use that, you shouldn't be surprised if people think you're just drunk on your own performance."

When you want to admit defeat, the point is to look like you're

actually defeated—continued Ochiba-chan, still with her faint smile.

"Rather than bowing your head, it's more important to slump your shoulders. With a downcast look. It's fine to get your eyes to tear up, but if you actually start crying, people will just think you're annoying. It's not smart to try and pressure them into forgiving you. It's pointless if it comes back to bite you later, after all. The best thing is to look like you're trying not to cry—you should lower your voice as much as possible, and… That's right, you should look like you're trying to endure your own shame."

"...Is it fine to not show any signs of remorse?"

I had no idea what she was trying to get at with this conversation, but I decided to keep it going—not because I thought it would provide a hint as to how to deal with her, but just because I was curious.

Or, as preparation.

"It can have the opposite effect if you appear to be too understanding. If anything, rather than being remorseful, you want to give off the impression that you want to refute them, so that the other person gets the feeling of 'making you surrender'. So that they experience the joy of making their opponent submit through force, or intellect, or logic, or justice. If you give people that kind of sexual excitement, their anger will cool down, and they'll be more forgiving."

It was pretty startling to hear the words "sexual excitement" coming from a high school girl in an enclosed car—but indeed, it really seemed like they would forgive her.

"But, Ochiba-chan. In the end, that isn't apologizing, it's just pretending to apologize, right? If they were to find out, they'd get even angrier… In that case, I feel like it would be better to apologize clumsily and without any strategy."

"As long as my sincerity gets across, you mean? But there are a lot of people that hate it when you apologize with something as egotistic as 'sincerity'—the real thrill of an apology comes from throwing away your 'ego' or your 'self' and becoming completely compliant. It's actually pretty funny once you get used to it. But putting that aside, just because I'm pretending to apologize, that doesn't mean I'm not being sincere or grateful, Araragi-senpai."

? What did she mean by that?

I would've thought that if I truly felt apologetic, I wouldn't need to pretend—like how borrowing the royal mantle of the King of Oddities didn't make me the King of Oddities myself.

"It's true that I feel sorry for my mom and dad. And it's because I feel sorry, I want to convey those feelings in the most cost-effective way."

"...Since there's no meaning to feelings that aren't conveyed?"

“Right. Like how there’s no meaning to love that isn’t conveyed—apparently, when my dad proposed to my mom, he came up with all sorts of plans like making reservations at a restaurant with a romantic night view or memorizing a Shakespearean sonnet. It’s like that.”

No matter how apologetic one felt, if they just vomited that feeling out as mere emotion—the one being vomited at would feel nothing but bewildered, like Meniko and me.

Unconventional apologies that didn’t conform to the standard, that ignored the feelings of the other person, were no different from just hitting that person—so when you apologize, you should make sure to look apologetic, was what she meant.

It was a good thing to learn.

“You called prostrating yourself a performance, but Ochiba-chan, aren’t all apologies a kind of performance? Going beyond just manners, rituals, or convention and instead being for the sake of hospitality.”

“Hospitality.[95] That’s exactly right—if someone is mad at you, you’d rather have them smiling, right? So you should do as much as you can.”

If there’s no front side, then there’s no back side, either.

If a smile is a front-facing expression, then an apology would have circumstances lying in the back.

It just makes me all the more invested in the performance.

After saying all that, Ochiba-chan bowed her head once more—slumping her shoulders and trembling.

It wasn’t the time to be impressed, but she really was good at it… If Hitagi or Oikura had acted like that, I might have actually believed them entirely.

But, if we turned that around—on the flip side, it didn’t necessarily mean that the aggressive apologizing of Naoetsu High graduates enrolled in Manase University, initiated by Hitagi, Oikura, and Boyfie-kun, were actually based on Ochiba-chan’s intentions or scheming.

They may be based on law, but they weren’t based on her.

They may have strings attached, but she wasn’t pulling the strings.

Let’s consider the case of Boyfie-kun. If he had been someone under Ochiba-chan’s control, then he wouldn’t have appeared in such a ragged state, and instead would have visited while wearing a crisp suit and bringing with him a box of cakes. That in itself would have been bewildering in a different way, but most likely, it would’ve been hard for me to turn the tables back on him.

Well… That’s what I wanted to think..

Otherwise, it didn't make that much sense.

Making them apologize by bringing back up things that have already been forgiven, or making them apologize by insisting that they've committed crimes that nobody accused them of… It was neither constructive nor productive. To borrow Ochiba-chan's words, such apologies held no hospitality for anyone.

But it was still possible.

Law wasn't my major, but even I knew that the intent of the law, and how it was interpreted or enforced, did not always match for every case—even an evil law may be a law, but in the end, all laws depended on their application. It was likely that the existence of a law expert, who would go and exterminate the human race because they carried the ideal that "all bad people should be executed", wasn't just a matter of a thought experiment.

The *ayamarei*.

The law was on a rampage—or was it Ochiba-chan's heart that was on a rampage?

Her uncontrollable feelings—were being conveyed.

Apologize.

"Those kangaroo-court-like apology press conferences are often criticized for being like public executions for the sake of entertainment, but in the first place, whether in Japan or other countries, executions have always been spectacles carried out in public places, right? It's all for show. It's all showmanship."

Showmanship.

At that word, I was reminded of the way Boyfie-kun had come apologizing to me in public.

"To go even further, it's showbiz. Rather than setting an example, capital punishment is just a spectacle. People just love it, you see. They love watching others apologize—especially watching people like me, who get carried away thinking they're so capable, apologize. In that case, I should get down on my knees to apologize in order to satisfy them, right? Oh, I'm not actually getting down on my knees, just handling it in a similar way."

"…Isn't it too early to give up?"

I cut her off.

I'd thoroughly discussed the viewpoint of the apologizing party with Ougi-chan, Meniko, Shinobu, Higasa-chan, and Hachikuji, so it was honestly pretty fresh to hear about the viewpoint of the party being apologized to. And while I wanted to keep talking about it, to keep trying to understand her philosophy, unfortunately, we were approaching our destination—so, before I accomplished my goal, I had to give it to her.

I had to give her a chance. A second chance.

“Huh? What do you mean, give up?”

“On your first-choice school. You said you’d changed it—you see, for me, at the start of January, I was half-dead. Oh, I mean my grades… But, from there, I was able to regain my strength—”

“……”

No, that wasn’t it.

As far as I could tell from her reaction in the rear-view mirror.

It was clearly ruining her mood. Up until now, she’d been almost pridefully explaining the aesthetics of an apology, but now, she was simply frowning.

“—If you want, I can be your private tutor in constant attendance. Night and day, twenty-four hours a day, giving you all my attention.”

It was an offer that I’d also given to Higasa-chan, but I’d been serious then, too.

It was because I’d gotten that same treatment, and so, it was the maximum I was capable of—you could also say it was the maximum I could concede, but even as I spoke those words, I could tell that that wasn’t it, either. It was obviously the wrong answer.

“—You’re saying the same things as those people, huh. I’m kind of disappointed—I thought I would hear something more unique from the legendary Araragi.”

Her faint smile had completely disappeared, and Ochiba-chan instead spoke with a mocking attitude.

“Don’t give up, keep at it, work hard, if I could do it, then so can you—you’re exactly the same as those people.”

“…Those people?”

I asked even though I knew what she meant, and the student said, “Those people are those people,” shaking her head.

“The Naoetsu High seniors I met at the open campus. The people I knew and the people I didn’t know, all of them had colorful backgrounds. Each with their own individual colors, making them all multicolored. Like being sick with an illness, or having once dropped out from school—”

“……”

“But, in the end, they said all the same things. Don’t give up, keep at it, work hard, if I could do it, then so can you—that’s not it. That’s not what I want to hear.”

I’m the one who knows the most that I can do it—said Ochiba-chan.

“It’s because I didn’t give up, I kept at it, and I worked hard that I’m suffering so much. If it was going to be like this, I wouldn’t have bothered—they say that it’s better to regret having done it than regret not having done it, but there’s no way that’s better! Because I’m

regretting it so much, you know!?"

She'd suddenly bent forward towards the driver's seat, though that movement was restricted by her seatbelt—it had just been an excuse, but I'm glad I'd gotten her to fasten it.

Well, even that might be too insecure, so perhaps I should've put her in the child seat instead. Even so, it would've been enough for my goal.

"I don't want you to cheer for me. I don't want you to tell me to keep at it. I don't want you to tell me to work hard. Even when I was on the track team, those words crushed me. I couldn't deal with everyone's expectations… I was never once able to run better during the real race than I did in practice. But even so, I thought I could carry over the willpower I'd gained from training to my studying, and my grades actually improved for a bit—but I stopped growing much earlier than I expected. Do you understand? The legendary Araragi. The feeling of being disappointed in yourself?"

Constantly, was what I said in response, but she didn't hear it—even now, I was disappointed in myself.

I couldn't even save a single worried girl.

Not in the same way I'd been saved.

"The more it felt like I couldn't do it, the more those cheers sounded like harassment. It sounded like a curse. No—like a command."

"…Then, Ochiba-chan. What did you want to hear?"

If you asked me, it was a leading question worse than Hachikuji's. I was trying to extract a definitive confession from her… My police officer parents would surely be lamenting my use of this method.

"What I wanted to hear? Well, during the open campus, even as I listened respectfully to my seniors, I was constantly thinking about this. During that alumni visit to convince my parents that I was still motivated, that I wasn't just taking the exam for show, I was permanently thinking about this. That I don't need words like, don't give up, keep at it, work hard."

Apologize.

For being fulfilled, for having fun, for being delighted, for being blessed, for standing at the top, for having everything, for looking down at me from above, for having time to spare, for acting self-important, for being neat and tidy, for being prepared, for laughing, for being speedy, for having connections, for making merry, for linking arms, for flourishing, for being high-class, for having no worries, for having no concerns, for being kind, for getting to choose, for conquering, for having a tomorrow, for having dreams for the future, for having no insecurity, for having peace of mind, for getting

to restart your life, for getting back on your feet, for having friends, for having lovers, for having a family, for having boyfriends, for having girlfriends, for being enriched, for having meaning, for achieving your goals, for being clever, for being educated, for being optimistic, for looking up, for taking center stage, for getting to soar, for being able to breathe, for not being hungry, for getting things resolved, for getting to make memories, for being festive, for having the wind blow in your direction, for being upwind, for being enlightened, for not being rained on, for having stars shining in the night sky, for having flowers bloom, for making it past the finish line, for producing results, for having good luck, for having sharp senses, for being cute, for being considerate, for being saved, for being able to meet, for being able to be together, for not being alone.

For being happy.

For having a story to tell.

“Apologize to me,”

said Ochiba-chan—the enforcer of the law gave the command.

As if burning away her own life.

“Apologize, apologize, apologize,

apologize, apologize, apologize, apologize, apologize, apologize,
apologize, apologize, apologize, apologize, apologize, apologize,
apologize, apologize, apologize, apologize, apologize, apologize,

apologize, apologize, apologize, apologize, apologize, apologize,
apologize, apologize, apologize, apologize, apologize, apologize,
apologize, apologize, apologize, apologize, apologize, apologize,

apologize, apologize, apologize,

I'm finally hearing something interesting—"

"*Bon appétit*, princess."

It's the specialty.

The worst cuisine, with the worst ingredients—with the worst atonement.[97]

At my signal, a golden-haired shadow crawled forth from beneath the child-seat-installed passenger seat—and that speed wasn't reflected in the rear-view mirror.

Of course, in her case, she could freely choose to be reflected or not—in particular, when she got serious, she wouldn't be reflected.

As if she didn't want to show her dining scene to me, or as if she had regained her true nature as a nightwalker for the first time in a while, the golden-haired young girl sank her fangs into another kind of neck, the ankle.[98] It may have been out of consideration that, since she was a girl with a bob cut, in the unlikely event that any bite marks remained, she could at least hide those marks with high socks—it seemed even the King of Oddities was splendidly fitting into human society.

However, though there was consideration, there was no forgiveness.

Now that she'd gotten her teeth in, she would suck it all up.

"Kya—kyaaaaa!?"

The high school girl screamed as though being night-crawled upon, but it actually was like the night itself was crawling upon her—with the doors being locked from the driver's seat, and with her being secured by the seatbelt, there was no way to escape.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!?"

She continued to scream in a panic.

But there was nothing she could do. As though she were undergoing maggot therapy, the "bad things" in her body were being sucked out together with her blood—but even though they were "bad things", they were an important part of her composition.

Her individuality was being erased before my eyes.

The legal system—was being reformed.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa—aaaaaaaaaa—aaaaaa—aaaaaaaaaa—aaaaa—"

Her school shoes were banging against the golden-haired young girl, but even against that vain struggle, the young girl's appetite was unperturbed. The young girl's greed increased all the more, as though consuming live seafood that still moved.

To tell the truth, this could've been done as soon as she'd entered the car—for a gourmet on Shinobu's level, even the taste of the raw ingredients was enough. Especially since I'd made her endure on campus during the day, putting on plenty of the greatest sauce:

hunger.

However, I chose this place.

It was more neglected than I'd thought, so it was hardly a fancy restaurant with a romantic night view, but for me, these cram school ruins were a special place.

At this commemorative location, I wanted to be together with you.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaa—aaa—aaaaa—aa—a—apologize!"

Despite her existence being threatened from her feet, or perhaps because of it, Ochiba-chan repeated her words. As though cursing. As though loathing. As though denying everything. As though in hot pursuit. As though begging.

As though reveling in her revenge.

"Apologize, apologize, apologize, apologize, apologize, apologize, apologize, apologize, apologize, apologize—"

"—All of you, stray from the right path."[99]

She'd finally become quiet, but my heart continued to pound.

As someone who'd lived his life consumed in an inferiority complex, I'd honestly believed that I'd be able to understand Ochiba-chan's feelings more… Even though I hadn't had any direct contact with her before, I'd been conceited enough into thinking that there was something I could tell her as her senior.

But it was hopeless.

Until the very end, I was unable to sympathize, and until the end of the end, she held more antagonism for me than I'd held for her… If I had still been a high schooler, in the same year as her, would I have been able to save Ochiba-chan in a much more proper way, instead of this use of force?

Could I have been able to help her?

Perhaps, being soaked to my shoulders in the lukewarm water of a moratorium, I was no longer able to understand the feelings, worries, and gloominess of high school students—if I had been soaked to my head, I might have said something completely different.

Those entrance exams, which should have been excruciating for me, had completely become good memories. Why was it that I felt the bitingly serious worries of those examinees as just small matters? The anguish of not seeing your grades rise, the frustration of changing your school of choice—maybe those were just common occurrences at that age…?

Now that I'd become capable, did incapable people start to

look incapable? Although, when it came to living, I should still be more incapable than anyone… If anything, I should be even worse at it than I was in the past.

But, even before that, this might be simple nostalgia… Instead of good memories, I was just beautifying my memories. In my high school days, I hadn't actually been all that helpful for Hitagi or Oikura, or for Kanbaru or Sengoku or Hachikuji.

So, it wasn't like I'd become weak.

I'd simply grown, in a way appropriate for my age.

Even though I could proceed to university, I couldn't evolve…
100 I still remained myself.

Not even the law could change the fact that I am me.

With the sound of chewing, attempting to swallow whole the complete book of the Six Codes that recorded all those stuffy laws, continuing on behind me, I entered the address of Ochiba-chan's house that I'd obtained from Higasa-chan into my navigation.

Stray from the right path.

Even that lovely wish, made from the condensed anguish of that discouraged girl, was something I couldn't comply with tonight.

“It’s been quite the long chat, hasn’t it?

“I’ve said a lot of preachy and explanatory things, but this and that and these and those are all in the past—the person that hates apologizing, that feels humiliated by bowing her head to others, is no longer me.

“The *ayamarei*, was it?

“Even if such an oddity did or didn’t exist, I believe I would have apologized to you, Koyomi, someday—the oddity phenomenon would be nothing more than a trigger to start things off, wouldn’t you say?

“My childhood days when I was sickly, my middle school days when I demonstrated my presence on the track team, my first and second year in high school when I was a closed-off young lady, and my third year in high school when I’d been rehabilitated—ultimately, all of those were me.

“The fact that I am me can’t be changed.

“After entering university, I’ve been thinking I might even be able to apologize to my mother, and not just the crab, but maybe four years later, when I’ve become a working adult, I might end up thinking of that sentiment as embarrassing, writhe in pain, and forget it ever happened.

“Is talking about that sort of dark history something you would talk about with your good friend, Ononoki Yotsugi-san?

“Or perhaps—the one who makes up your other side, Oshino Ougi-san?

“If it’s not just dark, but wrapped in darkness.

“Anyway, let’s wrap up this absurd talk about breaking up—and quickly move on to the next topic of discussion.

“Which is, for me, the real issue.

“Koyomi, I don’t remember being told about the episode of you moving next door to Sodachi-chan… If you’re okay with me, I’ll hear you out, all right?”

“So how was it, Araragi-senpai? In regards to the epilogue, or perhaps, the punch line. If you’re okay with me, I’d like to inquire into what you have to say.”

The next day, after having stayed the second night in a row at my parents’ place, I’d begun driving my car since early in the morning to get to school, and it was then that a slippery-sounding voice came from behind—when I checked the rear-view mirror, in the exact same place that Ochiba-chan had sat last night, naturally with his seatbelt fastened, was the *gakuran*-clad young man, Oshino Ougi.

If Ougi-chan was appearing in the final chapter, it made it feel like a normal bad end—even though it was the break of dawn, my way forward seemed bleak with no signs of light, making me want to use my high-beams.

Even if you asked me about the punch line, I couldn’t even indulge myself in remaining calm.[101]

When and how did you even get on?

Don’t tell me you loaded your BMX on the roof of this car. That’s only meant for surfboards.

“It was an easy victory, right? For Araragi-senpai, who has grown as a person after entering university, a high school girl in general should be a cakewalk. A high school girl taking the general entrance exams, that is.”

“…This is no time for jokes.”

He was trying to provoke me, but I had no desire to jump on board—even with one night having passed, I hadn’t recovered from my fatigue. In terms of growth, it felt like I’d gained three hundred years of experience in that one night.

“I hadn’t meant to look down on her, but I’d actually been pretty anxious. From what I heard afterwards, it was apparently a grudge so large that even the big eater, Shinobu, almost got tired of eating it.”

Even if there had been a gap since she last worked.

In the end, oddities that I was bad with were in the realm that Shinobu was bad with, too… Well, no, it’s not that simple of a problem.

I was just fed up with myself for only ever being able to bring these things to the same conclusion—I couldn’t help but keep wondering if a different punch line was possible.

“Ha ha. It may not have been the best, but it was one of the better ways to resolve it.”

“If anything, it feels more like I avoided the worst and only

came up with one of the worse ones. It's so bad it's not even a joke—I can't say I was able to save anyone, but I suppose I was able to avoid the worst-case scenario."

I'd confirmed as much last night.

When I got in touch with them from my parents' home, neither Hitagi nor Oikura appeared to have remembered the turmoil of the past few days—no, that made it sound like it was like Black Hanekawa, as if they'd sealed away their memories. But it wasn't like that. They roughly remembered that some (fruitless) exchange had taken place, but they were acting like it had been a matter of little importance. Like, it's amazing you still remember our trivial little chat.

And so, in a way.

It was like they were saying—why are you dragging back up something that's already been resolved, after all this time?

It's fine, already. That's not important.

"I'm planning to check on Meniko and Boyfie-kun once I arrive at the university… But from what I can sense, all the Naoetsu High graduates that had been under the influence of the *ayamarei* should be in the same state."

"How wonderful. Isn't that what the original role of an apology is supposed to be? To say that everything's fine."

"…That's a beneficial way to put it."

Or a destructive way.[102]

When it came to Oikura, I'd been worried that she might resort to self-harm when she came to her senses about having lowered her head to me, but she hadn't been like that at all—in fact, she'd even snapped back at me for calling her for something so unimportant.

Even the breakup talks with Hitagi had been left uncertain.

"Every last one of them seems to lack self-awareness, as if saying, 'That was just me solemnly following the law.' The law from back then. The more we talk, the less our words match up. Well, that was the same with Ochiba-chan—"

It wasn't like Ochiba-chan, the enforcer of the law, was filled with malicious intent to drive the seniors she'd met at the open campus into madness. She was filled with hatred, she was filled with an inferiority complex, she was filled with rage, but she wasn't filled with malice.

If anything, she was hollow.

Unknowingly, unconsciously, and irresponsibly.

She'd prayed… She'd harbored a grudge.

Or, an idea.[103]

"In legal terms, she'd be a *bona fide* third party—honestly, even now, it's frightening. It makes me tremble. To think that a 'normal-

seeming girl' like her could have that much of an influence on people like Senjougahara Hitagi or Oikura Sodachi, who I would consider 'special people' in their own class in my life—the world sure is vast."

Though that wasn't really something to say after returning to my hometown.

I'd brought up her name without really thinking about it, but in terms of the amount of "harm" caused, I guess it would be on the level of Black Hanekawa during Golden Week? Also due to the fact that we'd dealt with it in almost the exact same way…

"I guess I didn't realize since I'm not all that discerning, but Ochiba-chan was a Hanekawa-class high school girl, wasn't she? With a talent that would never be discovered under the modern examination system—"

"I'm a fan of the idea that someone can be a special person to someone else, but I think it's the opposite, Araragi-senpai."

Or, rather than the opposite, should it be the flip side?

Ougi-chan said so with a grin.

"Namely, special people are dragged down by normal people—any great man will be helpless before public opinion and pressure, wouldn't you say? Popular people are enslaved by their popularity, and dictators will be mocked with the winds of time. Aren't even the Six Codes full of such traps? Trying to trick you into making mistakes, to force you into apologizing. Even Oikura-senpai, who you regard as special, was dragged down from the position of class representative and forced into truancy by the normal classmates of Class 1-3, right?"

"……"

"Even if Jouraku Ochiba was 'a high school girl that could be found anywhere', isn't that even more frightening than an assassin? 'Could be found anywhere'—it's almost like some monstrous apparition."

Certainly, a person like her could be found anywhere… At high school, at university, in society, at home, in private practices, in the roots of grass, beneath the grass, anywhere.

A person that could express that level of resentment to someone completely unrelated to them—I was speaking as if it was someone else's business, but even I, who was "a high school boy that could be found anywhere", contained such elements.

After becoming a dropout, I'd dismissed all those honors students as disgusting elitists that were only capable of studying… Of course, there was also the trauma I'd experienced from Class 1-3, but even so, why had I glared so thornily at those students?

I had thought I was being ostracized, but in fact, I was failing to turn my eyes towards students like Jouraku Ochiba, students that there must have been more of in my grade, students that should have

been my comrades. And instead, I'd let my complex grow, all on my own.

I'd assumed that I was "alone", and everyone else was "together".

If I hadn't experienced that hell or nightmare—perhaps I would have continued to complain about those high school elitists, with an ideology more monstrous than a vampire.

Jouraku Ochiba was nothing more than a representative.

Just one person, among the angry masses.

"Not even a vampire could contend against it, huh… That's exactly it. I'd realized it when I got involved with Higasa-chan and the members of the girls' basketball team, but there really are tons of different types of people at school that I just wasn't aware of."

"And there are tons of different types of oddities, too—school ghost stories don't just end at the seven wonders. There are as many wonders as there are people. The 7.7 billion wonders of the world."

People were being tested, said Ougi-chan.

I didn't want him to summarize the thrilling events of last night so easily—but it was #5. Pushing boundaries, huh.

"I was able to hear the fifth possibility from Hachikuji, but in the end, the correct answer was #4. Chain of command, wasn't it?"

"I wonder about that. Aren't you satisfied with that, Araragi-senpai?"

What the heck. Don't suddenly start being suggestive.

"In the first place, Ougi-chan, you didn't really support #4 all that strongly."

"No, no. If I truly didn't support it, then I wouldn't have even mentioned it. It was just that the other possibilities were just as likely, using my specialty of relativization. Though I say specialty, I suppose it was out of thirteen[104]—you may have decided, Araragi-senpai, that Senjougahara-senpai and Oikura-senpai were people that would never apologize, but don't forget that those people special to you are people that you can find anywhere. If anything, you should consider yourself lucky that this experience was the fault of an oddity."

He seemed to be implying that this level of trouble, that was neither hellish nor nightmarish, was something that could happen any number of times from now on—speaking as though he was testing me.

"Ha ha. If you ask me, Araragi-senpai, then what you did was in fact #5. Pushing boundaries. To someone that was apologizing to you, you were practically saying stuff like, 'But you don't actually feel bad, right?' 'You're thinking that it's something everyone else does, so why are you the only one getting scolded?' 'Do you even know why I'm mad? Can you tell me what you've done wrong?' Trying to draw out any foolish verbal slips from them."

When he was saying that much, I had no words to say in response.

Nor did I have any words of apology.

"I'm not mad because you made a mistake, I'm mad because you tried to cover it up… That's something people often say, but regarding the cases of Senjougahara-senpai and Oikura-senpai, it was more like you succeeded in their cover-up operation, Araragi-senpai… I won't say you took responsibility for their wrongdoings, but you shifted the blame and turned a blind eye to it. And perhaps even in the case of your friend, too. You took the trouble that formed in a male-female relationship and made it the fault of an oddity, with great success. In the sense that you were able to succeed in finding the culprit, it was a finale befitting of a mystery novel."

"……"

"Perhaps I'm being a bit malicious. If so, I'll apologize from the bottom of my heart. But no worries. If it's you, Araragi-senpai, you'll probably lament Jouraku Ochiba's future and try to keep returning to your hometown to check up on her, but if a university student keeps treating a high school girl like that without any sort of intermediary, that would practically be a crime. So from now on, just leave the rest to me."

"Mm…"

I felt like, with that dismissive offer he gave me, I was being pressured to give up—it was true that I hadn't planned on being done with Ochiba-chan just yet.

Even though I'd managed to revise and repeal that evil law, it was possible that she'd proclaim a similar law once her depression reaccumulated—just as how Black Hanekawa didn't fully disappear just because her stress had been deliciously consumed. Perhaps the next targets wouldn't be Naoetsu High graduates that went to Manase University, but even so, I couldn't just ignore another calamity on that level.

But no matter how much I considered it, I was unfit to be her private tutor, and probably completely useless in that respect, but as her upperclassman, and as a human being, there had to be something I could do—even if I couldn't empathize, I could still be there for her.

"But I'm saying that you can't. If you do, it would be a crime—it even made me tremble with fear. When I heard that Araragi-senpai had confined Jouraku-senpai in his car."

"That was something that was done to me just before graduation, though. I was confined in a car, restrained with a seatbelt, and taken here and there."

Though even her apology for that had been left uncertain.

But, since we had both been high schoolers at the time, it was

fine to leave it uncertain.

"It's been a tradition of mine to have girls ride on the back seat… But you want me to entrust this tradition of riding double to you, Ougi-chan? So when you had me ride behind you, was that meant to be a ritual to pass down the tradition? Even though you were pretending to be so busy. What are you scheming?"

"My, my, don't say that. Seeing as we're two sides of the same coin, it's always been my role to do the things that you couldn't do, Araragi-senpai."

"...I don't remember ever asking you to do that, though."

"Please rely on me anyway, and don't say that. After all, even Kanbaru-senpai, whom I admire so much, is about to reach the finish line of graduation, so it's about time for me to think about what I'm going to do next—I'll need to decide on my future. However, though you say that you don't remember asking me, didn't you mention the other day how you wanted me to start haunting Higasa-senpai next?"

"I did say that… But you sure are quick to pounce on what I say."

"But this will be the last time I follow you around and clean up after your mess.[105] Now that I'm entering my senior year, I needed to have that level of awareness… I can't remain unaware forever. I'll follow Araragi-senpai's example, and go beyond Araragi-senpai, and become aware of not just Higasa-senpai… But all students of Naoetsu High."

"All students?"

"Including the students that you weren't able to pay attention to, Araragi-senpai. Dear me, thinking about it now, I suppose I've been quite the cause for concern, haven't I? I truly am sorry for how impertinent I've been up until now."

It was more like he'd been quite the nuisance, but Ougi-chan bowed his head in a bit of a forced manner. It was rare to receive an apology without any apologetic feelings—but on top of that, it didn't even feel like a performance.

"People can only be saved on their own—certainly, just as my uncle has said, it won't be possible to help those dropouts. But I think I'll be able to scoop[106] up the students that have spilled out[107]. Don't you think that snuggling up close to the shadows, in the heart of a high school girl that can be found anywhere, is a fitting job for the darkness that can be found anywhere?"

While snickering about how that sounded less like a job and more like a hobby, I wanted to see with my own two eyes what kind of face he'd been making as he said that line, so I waited for a red light before turning around—but, with the seatbelt still in place, his dark form had vanished.

I turned back to look into the rear-view mirror in surprise, but it was the same.

As though he had never been there from the beginning, like he was some sort of taxi-related ghost story, Oshino Ougi disappeared from right in front of me—or from right behind me. Or did I just think that I was having a conversation, and he really hadn't been there from the beginning?

He wouldn't be reflected in the mirror if he got serious—was that it?

When I remembered to check the navigation, the current location was right around where I would be entering the neighboring town—not that Ougi-chan was some sort of god that governed the town. Perhaps, like how Oshino Shinobu chose to be bound to my shadow—Oshino Ougi chose to be bound to Naoetsu High.

In place of me, who was incapable of doing so.

He chose to snuggle up close to those boys and girls.

To become a darkness that could shine a light on the shadows in their hearts—and if so.

"Even though I always considered the two of us to be two sides of the same coin—what a lonely betrayal."[108]

As if to shake off those sad thoughts, I turned to the juniors from my alma mater and recited, "I'm so sorry for you," without anyone asking me to… But it was fine, there was no need to worry.

Even though it may feel like being shadowed by harassment.

That darkness is but the flip side of love.

Ougi Flight

001

When it came to Araundo Uroko, there was very little that I had been able to officially confirm. It wasn't because I was an ignoramus, but because to almost everybody, there was such a confusing overabundance of ways to describe her that it made her unidentifiable. The level of confusion started from whether or not something was even describing her or not.

Supposedly, she was a snake charmer.

Supposedly, she was a coiled whirlpool of desires.

Supposedly, she was a huge, five-headed snake.

With so much vague information, I didn't know how much I could accept—I didn't know how much I could swallow. It was all rumors of dubious authenticity.

When I thought I'd managed to grasp her true form, she'd slip away like an eel, and all that would be left in my hands would be the dry skin that she had shed—without any answers, I had no way to respond. What was left was the scale marks from her skin or the bite marks from her poisonous fangs. Though I crawled along the ground to search for her, Uroko was more shrouded in mystery than a *tsuchinoko*. But I couldn't get a grip on any clues with my hands or feet—she'd covered all her bases from her head to her tail[109], making it from beginning to end[110] a dull search.[111]

But even so, I needed to find it.

Not the snake's den, but the snake's headquarters.

Because if I were to turn a blind eye to her path of injustice, which surely wasn't the same snake's path as mine[112], then apologizing wouldn't be enough—it would probably be unforgivable.

“I’ve always been wondering about which of my friends would be the first to come visit me—but I never expected it would be you, the ever-so-cute Nadeko-chan.”

I’m in despair at my own lack of popularity.[113]

Nakuna-chan, who lay in her sickbed riddled with holes, said that quite unexpectedly.

And when I said riddled with holes, that wasn’t a metaphor to mean that what she was saying was completely inconsistent, but a description of how she looked—Nakuna-chan’s head, neck, collarbone, chest, arms, hands, and fingers had all been pierced through with holes.

Perforations that you could see through to the other side dotted her body at random—a person with trypophobia would faint at the sight.

Rather than saying that holes had formed in Nakuna-chan, it was more like Nakuna-chan was formed from stitching together the spaces between the holes.

Though I couldn’t see them, I had no doubt that her torso concealed by the patient gown she wore and her legs concealed by the bed’s blanket were in the same state—if I looked closely, I could see that the thin bedding had slight indentations here and there, where the holes would be.

To speak figuratively and imprudently, her body was like the chassis of a lightweight Mini 4WD—she wasn’t the same as Senjougahara-san, who’d once been caught by a crab, but wouldn’t her weight have gotten considerably lighter?

Of course, the holes didn’t actually exist.

The idea of holes existing was kind of a contradiction, even figuratively speaking (it reminded me of the donuts that Shinobu-chan loves—“eat the donuts leaving only the holes behind!”), but in any case, it was impossible for a person to survive with their body covered with this many perforations… Even with half the number, or even a fourth.

Depending on the location, even one was impossible.

Like, there was a hole in her eyeball, and I could see through it to the wall behind her, you know? And her neck was so full of holes that it wasn’t even hanging on by a thread[114]—if I were to describe it as a gigantic hole punch having gouged out her body, was that punchy enough to get the message across, even despite my poor descriptive ability?

I wasn’t very good at expressing things with words. I’ve been

inarticulate for quite a long time.

With that in mind, if you would allow me to amend one of my previous statements, then the holes that covered Nakuna-chan's body were not completely at random, when I looked closely—the locations were scattered all over, but there were always two equidistant holes that appeared as one set.

Two holes.

Does that remind you of something?

That's right, they were just like the vampire bite marks in the nape of the neck of *that* person—however, in this case, they were not from the fangs of a vampire, but the fangs of a snake.

If a giant snake with giant fangs were to bite into her body all over the place… A human body would naturally end up like this. With these air holes.[115] Of course, before that, they would usually end up dying…

They would lose their life to those holes.

Before, when I had been cursed by a snake, my entire body had become covered in scale marks—but the caster of that curse, Nakuna-chan, my friend who criticized me behind my back, had ended up in this state.

If you curse someone, dig two graves—that's a phrase you often hear.

But in reality, for those holes that lacked existence[116], there were more than just two… Even when grouping them into pairs, hadn't she been bitten at least a hundred times?

In other words, if you curse someone, dig two hundred graves.

"What are you standing around for, Nadeko-chan? Have a seat… You didn't just come to see my face, right?"

Blunt as she was, Nakuna-chan gestured to a chair… But I couldn't let down my guard here. After all, Nakuna-chan was the type of friend to offer you a chair, and then pull that chair out from underneath you as you went to sit down.

It was true that I hadn't come just to see her face… Not that I could see more than half of it, as it was covered with holes.

"Your body… Are you okay?"

While carefully gripping the folding chair with both hands as I sat down, I posed that question… It wasn't a very good question to ask a long-term inpatient, but after seeing the number of holes far surpassing my expectations, I couldn't hold it back.

"Oh, what a surprise. For Nadeko-chan to be worrying about me—and I was sure you'd come to get revenge."

Though her laugh was somewhat self-deprecating, her biting attitude certainly reminded me of what she was like in the past, but…

"I'm completely fine. I'm fine, and I'm well. It's not like I'm in

the hospital because of any injuries. I'm just in bad shape. And I've started zoning out and daydreaming for longer and longer… So just in case, I've been hospitalized."

A response like that wasn't something I could just take at face value—daydreaming?

Daydreams, from white snakes…[117] At least, it didn't seem like she had any subjective symptoms.

Since they were far from simple injuries.

"Huh—did you cut your hair, Nadeko-chan?"

Nakuna-chan asked as though she'd only just noticed.

If it were a year ago, it would've been much like her to pretend to "notice belatedly because she didn't care", for the sake of irony or asserting dominance, but right now, that didn't seem to be the case.

Sengoku Nadeko may have transformed from a hairstyle with bangs long enough to hide her face to the current very short haircut, but it wasn't unreasonable that she didn't realize until I came this close to her—after all, the knotholes in her eyes practically made her blind.[118]

Knotholes, or air holes, or snake holes.

I was shocked she was even capable of seeing.

"Yeah… A lot happened."

"I see… Looks good on you."

It had still been blunt, but I didn't expect Nakuna-chan would give me words of praise… Whenever someone got a haircut, her response had almost always been the not-particularly-regal attitude of, "You looked better before."

Perhaps the hospital environment was making me think this, but… Even without taking into account her perforated body, she seemed feeble.

Nakuna-chan had always given off the impression of being perfectly styled… But now, she looked entirely disheveled, with no signs of grooming herself.

Full of split ends.

Even though she was a character that never forgot to show off, even against someone like me who she saw as lower-class, to think she would allow anyone to see her in her emaciated state, dressed down in an ill-fitting patient gown… Not that I was one to talk, considering I'd come in a school jersey. Though she could just as easily have been wearing a thick cloak and carrying a regal scepter—I was reminded of her first words.

About how I'd been the first of her friends to come visit her.

In terms of the timing, Nakuna-chan should have been hospitalized around June of last year… And since then, not one person came to visit?

Even though it was Nakuna-chan, who'd been surrounded by followers, er, friends?

"Let me take a closer look… At your hair."

Nakuna-chan beckoned me closer.

To do that when I was already this close, she must really not be able to see well… As I thought that, I pulled my chair closer to the bed, by about ten centimeters.

Nakuna-chan stared at me for a while—what, was my very short cut really that unusual?

That was what I'd been thinking, but it seemed that Nakuna-chan was not looking at my hair, nor my non-existent bangs, but my face, which had become exposed after I'd cut my hair.

"Really—it looks good. Good. Feels like my eyes are being healed."

Nakuna-chan spoke as though muttering to herself—it probably actually was just self-talk. She wasn't saying it to me.

"Good. Good. Good—it's cute."

"……"

"You're enthralling. I can say that proudly."

You're a friend that I'm proud of—said Nakuna-chan, continuing her murmuring in a manner more absentminded than enthralled.

"Compared to you, just look at me."

With that, Nakuna-chan felt her face with both hands—her hole-ridden face. My heart pounded as I watched, worried that her fingers might slip into those holes.

Don't treat your face so roughly…

"It's embarrassing to welcome you with this no-makeup face, Nadeko-chan—even though I tried so hard to be stylish so I'd be fine even when I got compared with you. In the end, Nadeko-chan, I'm worthless without you beside me—I lose all motivation, and I end up like this."

When she said "like this", she surely didn't mean the way she was riddled with holes—however, the way she implied that her disheveled hair and dressed-down patient gown were because I wasn't there beside her was an unexpected attack.

Was it just a feeble remark from her emaciated state? Or had her true thoughts leaked out through her holes?

Like a recorder.

As if misunderstanding my wavering emotions—

"Are you thinking, 'You deserve it'? Nadeko-chan,"

said Nakuna-chan.

"Or do you just think it's funny? To see your bully being reduced to such a state. After all, even the ones I considered old

friends, my classmates with whom I'd spent so much time gossiping with, are now bad-mouthing me."

So I really had been bullied.

Because I didn't want to acknowledge it, I'd pretended not to notice… But, even after hearing that, "You deserve it" was something I didn't think. And couldn't think.

Honestly, when I'd heard that Nakuna-chan had been hospitalized, I wouldn't say that I didn't foresee myself having those feelings, but after seeing Nakuna-chan all full of holes like this, those fleeting feelings vanished in an instant.

They'd evaporated, and they'd recoiled away.

Because I hadn't foreseen that she had received this awful of a punishment, from the heavens or from the gods… Frankly, compared to this, the curse I'd received was for beginners.

I never thought there was something this high-level.

"There's no way your old friends are all bad-mouthing you… Right? Maybe they're folding you a thousand paper cranes, and it's just taking a while…"

Put on the spot, I'd ended up following up with a foolish response, but…

"I'm following them all on social media. Publicly and privately, they're saying everything they want to say."

Nakuna-chan's following was even more foolish… You absolutely should not be looking at those accounts.

In other words, Nakuna-chan's old friends essentially didn't care whether their feelings were seen or not, so they were unanimously bad-mouthing her in public areas… An extreme disrespect for the former empress's authority.

In a way, they were baring their fangs.

It wasn't exactly a refreshing story.

Though Nakuna-chan's heart was literally empty.[119]

"Then again, these days they've stopped bad-mouthing me entirely… It's like I've been forgotten by the entire class. I wonder if they've decided to act like I was never there from the beginning."

Well, in the first place, our classes have changed.

But it was possible that such an idea had never struck Nakuna-chan… After spending her time constantly in the same room, she might have lost her sense of time… She hadn't said anything like, "Long time no see," either, even though it had been a year since we'd last seen each other.

She spoke as though summer vacation had just ended.

Or perhaps the long holidays.

"But I'm not trying to change the subject. You're actually thinking, 'You deserve it,' right? I won't get mad, so just say it. You

might feel better if you just say it, you know? C'mon, I might even get mad if you don't say it. Isn't it tough to keep things all awkward like this? Just let it all out. Maybe if you just try spitting it out, Nadeko-chan, you might realize that you actually felt that way all this time."

She was really intent on getting that confession out of me… Hmm.

It really was true that I wasn't thinking anything like, "You deserve it," but if I were to tell her that outright, she might just get disappointed.

Or, in her own words, fall into despair.

"I wish there were even more holes in you, Nakuna-chan!" was, of course, something I didn't feel at all… If anything, what I felt was more something like, the Nakuna-chan that I knew would try to look cool even in this terrible situation… It seemed that a part of me was expecting, wouldn't she be able to remain cool and dignified?

Wouldn't she be able to show a strength that completely ignored the snake's curse…? Not just traces of that strength, not just showing off, not just a bold front for her inferiority.[120]

I was aware that I was asking too much of her.

With her whole body being full of holes (even if she didn't have any subjective symptoms), if she had still been lively and energetic, that would be more terrifying than anything—however, back when I'd still attended school, what I'd felt from Nakuna-chan was exactly that terror.

Sturdy, unwavering, unbreakable.

She wouldn't tolerate any defiance, from classmates or close friends.

In terms of "You deserve it," then honestly, I didn't really want to be looking at the sorry state Her Majesty was in.[121] Considering what she'd done to me, I didn't really have a reason to pity her, but still, it made me feel pitiful towards myself.

After seeing her looking this weak, it even made me think, what had I been so afraid of?— could all of her old friends have performed the same about-face?

"By the way, Nadeko-chan, I heard you aren't going to school right now? Even though you aren't even hospitalized? Is that because of me?"

Oh my, Your Majesty, it seems you haven't been slacking off in your information gathering. I apologize for disgracing your ears with the news of my own truancy.

"Mm… That's not really it—I guess."

"What? Are you saying that I'm completely unrelated?"

It seemed Her Majesty had taken offense to that. What a difficult person. Difficult, or just peevish…[122] And yet, I was telling

the truth.

When it came to my truancy, I was the cause and the culprit… [123] If you traced it back, perhaps you could say that Nakuna-chan was an indirect cause, but even if I hadn't been cursed by a snake at the time, there was a high chance that something similar would have happened at the end of the year, regardless.

At worst, it could have been me on that bed riddled with holes… In that sense, thinking that Nakuna-chan deserved it would be completely barking up the wrong tree.

We were badgers of the same hole…[124] Or rather, snakes.

Like attracts like—or does it attract snakes?

"I won't say that you're unrelated, but our relationship fell apart, didn't it?"

"Oh? Nadeko-chan, did you stop referring to yourself as 'Nadeko' in the third person? Even though that used to be so cute. So childishly cute,"

said Nakuna-chan with a cynical smile—her teeth and tongue gaping with holes.

"Even though you seduced every guy in our grade with that natural cuteness of yours."

"…Every guy in our grade is an exaggeration, isn't it?"

"That's true. At best, it was just Sunshi-kun."

Sunshi-kun?

My thoughts of "Who's that?" ended up being extremely apparent on my face. If I still had my bangs, I could have hidden my face, but my very short cut couldn't even hide my eyebrows that were scrunched in confusion.

Short hair cannot hide even the Seven Wonders.[125]

That won't do, Her Majesty will be displeased… Sunshi-kun, Sunshi-kun… Right, I'd heard that name somewhere… Considering the flow of the conversation, I could guess that he was one amongst those "guys in our grade"…

"Ah."

"You shouldn't be going, 'Ah,' like that… Like you only just remembered. Why are you forgetting the guy that confessed his love to you?"

"I, I just didn't remember his given name. When you suddenly say it like that… I remember his family name, though. It's Sajou-kun, right?"

I was trying to smooth things over, but this was by no means a deception… I really thought I'd hammered his full name into my mind, until just now. Until this very moment.

It was just a memory lapse.

It had simply slipped my mind from the shock of seeing

Nakuna-chan in her current condition—my synapses hadn't linked up. I really wasn't lying. After all, it hadn't been against my expectations that his name would come up during this conversation.

It was an unavoidable source of conflict.

The fact that he'd confessed to me.

"B-but, that was just a joke, you know? You say that he confessed to me, but that was really just a product of maliciously teasing a gloomy, downcast, inarticulate, and bashful girl."

"A product of malice? You're the one full of malice towards guys, huh. But that's what it is about you, right, Nadeko-chan? That's what's cute about you. Does it still make you bashful to hear that?"

"Er… Well, that's, um…"

It was a little different from feeling bashful, but it did make me flinch and look away—partly because it was hard to look directly at Nakuna-chan, but also partly because I had remembered those days when I'd been an inarticulate and bashful girl who had hidden behind the bangs she'd grown out.

"So, did you reject him? If that was all the product of malice. It seemed like you didn't really give Sunshi-kun a clear reason, though."

"Weeell, thaaat's, uummmm…"

In the past, someone had asked a similar question, and I remembered that my response had been, "No, because I have someone else I like" (it was a draining memory)126, but if I said the same thing now, I was afraid she would begin pressuring me by saying, "Who is it? Who do you like? Just try spitting it out."

I wasn't here to be pressured, and I wasn't here to be afraid.

"Y-you know, Sunshi-kun? I already knew that you liked him, Nakuna-chan. It was too great of an honor, and I understood that an underling like me wasn't fit for someone like him, so that was why I ended up turning him down…"

Uh-oh.

My old habits of sucking up to powerful people.

It had just been me trying to keep my head down and wait for the storm to pass, but there were those that saw this servility as cute, and even flirtatious… Sunshi-kun was one of those people, as was Nakuna-chan.

To think I was flirting, and then hating me for it…

It was like adding insult to injury.

"...Do you realize that I placed a curse on you because I was fed up with that attitude of yours?"

"Ah, no, you've enlightened me, just now. As always, Nakuna-chan, your teachings are deeply inspiring…"

No, that wasn't it!

It wasn't like I wanted to reconstruct the former relationship

we had… What kind of “scrap and build” approach was this?[127] If anything, we’d just end up right back where we started.

The question would then be, what had I come to do, really? But that topic was quite the problem.

“No, but, like, I’m serious. When you acted like that, Nadeko-chan, it felt like you were looking down on me, and I couldn’t take it anymore… When I thought that you were just trying to have your way with me, it pissed me off… But.”

But?

I was sure she would continue telling me off like that for an hour or so, but Nakuna-chan had brought out that adversative conjunction earlier than I was expecting.

“Now, I couldn’t care less anymore… It’s like, I don’t understand why that used to piss me off so much. It’s like my endurance meter was at its limit, but now it’s been completely drained…”

Perhaps it had drained out of those holes. That endurance meter or whatever.

As if her emotions were unable to remain in her body, spilling out through those holes like from a showerhead… As a result, she just gave off a hole-ridden, hollow impression.

Thinking that made me feel more maudlin than just emotional, but…

“That’s right. So even if it was your fault, Nadeko-chan, I’ll forgive you.”

With that offhand remark, it felt like I’d taken a punch to the face—I’d nearly fallen from the pipe chair, thinking that I’d actually been punched.

I had almost reacted ostentatiously.

Was she serious?

After driving me to a corner and then casting that outrageous curse, imposing a blend of physical and mental anguish on me, she wasn’t apologizing but offering generous words of forgiveness…?

It felt like the hairs of my very short cut were standing on end, like a reverse scale… Rather than Anti-Nadeko, it felt like I’d just barely avoided transforming into Divine Nadeko.[128]

I really was bad with her.

Or rather, I just hated her.

Even after becoming a husk like this—even after becoming a snake’s shed skin—it seemed her true nature wouldn’t change.

Well, from her point of view, that had to apply to me, too… After cutting my hair, I may have become more upright, more front-facing, and more articulate, but in the end, I might still be “Nadeko-chan, who couldn’t do anything without me”.

I'd been thinking something so unhinged as wanting to see her in her former dignified state, but after seeing her in real life, withered away as she was, I just ended up taking a tremendous amount of damage… But whatever, I'll swallow it back.

And I'll swallow it whole, that feeling of pain.

To endure what is unendurable is true endurance—even my endurance meter might be full of holes by now, so it was time for a new one.

I hadn't come to try and get her to admit fault, either—so, what had I come here for?

"…Nakuna-chan. I have a favor to ask, so would you mind?"

"Hm?"

Nakuna-chan tilted her head to the side—with her neck full of holes, it made me anxious that her head might fall off.

"How nostalgic… To have Nadeko-chan ask a favor from me. You sure asked a ton of crazy things. But fine. I'll grant your request. What is it?"

She was a benevolent saintess that took on the request without even listening to it… That was something I liked about her, wasn't it?

For someone as timid and passive as me, she was someone I could depend on.

It was true that there had once been times when things had been going well with Her Majesty, or the saintess… Trying not to forget those times, I said,

"Can you be a model for one of my drawings? I'm aiming to become a courtroom sketch artist,"

and pulled out my sketchbook.

Leaving the hospital ward behind me, if I took some wrong paths, I would reach Ononoki-chan waiting for me on a downstairs landing—a peculiar eyepatch-wearing tween girl standing by. She was an expressionless doll wearing a daring open-backed dress that would make you confuse her for a French singer that had come to comfort a patient, but seeing her face was a relief to me.

"Good work, Nade*kou*."

To those monotone words of appreciation, I responded, "Yup—I'm exhausted," as I descended the stairs.

"Having to forgive someone who isn't apologizing can be this painful, huh. It might've been more painful than having my entire body be squeezed by a snake… I never knew."

"It's not like you had to forgive her. You didn't have to overcome her, either. You should've just lightly sidestepped it and forgotten about it all."

Ononoki-chan said so indifferently as she took the sketchbook I offered her—she flipped through the pages to check it.

"Do you regret it? Visiting your old friend."

"Mm, no. It's not on the level of regret… I think."

Rather, I was embarrassed at having carelessly told a lie as nonsensical as wanting to be a courtroom sketch artist. But I couldn't possibly mention my dream to become a mangaka in front of Nakuna-chan.

Tch. My darn pride.

Even though I swore to profess my dreams!

"Your tastes are pretty peculiar, too, to bring up wanting to be a courtroom sketch artist at a time like that. Maybe you were unconsciously treating her like a defendant."

It's the shadows in the hearts of middle schoolers, said Ononoki-chan.

That's saying something.

But, perhaps that really was what I was thinking—and yet, even though Nakuna-chan was sensitive to malicious intent aimed at her, it was surprising that she readily agreed to become my model.

Perhaps she really had fallen a lot.

From the Tooboe Nakuna-chan that I knew.

"Maybe now, Nakuna-chan wouldn't make fun of me even if I told her my real dream…"

"That's for sure. At the very least, she wouldn't be like your lovable parents constantly repeating, 'anything but a mangaka'."

"Right… I never thought my parents would criticize me using

such words."

Incidentally, what they meant was that I was "a girl who couldn't become 'anything but' a mangaka".

Before being rude to their daughter, it was rude to all mangaka… It was much too large of a wound to be considered defamation.[129] I was aware I was causing a great deal of trouble, so I could forgive their opinions of me, but I could not forgive their opinions of Tezuka Osamu.

"It's not like your parents brought up Tezuka Osamu. Or did you tell them? That you were going to become Tezuka Osamu?"

"Of course not. As if I would."

"That reminds me, Nade*kou*. How was that AI Tezuka Osamu project? As a doll created as an imitation of humans, it makes me curious."

How was it, indeed?

It was hard to say what constituted a Tezuka work… Because even if you say "Tezuka Osamu", he comprises a large range of works and a large range of eras. Even if you put his most famous works, like *Phoenix* and *Black Jack*, through a deep learning model, I had the feeling the output wouldn't be Tezuka Osamu.

"I see. On the other hand, even if you gathered all of Tezuka Osamu's failed works, it wouldn't be very recognizable, either."

"Tezuka-sensei has never failed. There have only been times where he surpassed our comprehension."

"You're someone who should never get involved in the production of AI Tezuka Osamu."

"I may not have said anything about becoming Tezuka Osamu, but I may have said something about becoming Tezuka Osamu's assistant."

"What a weirdly lofty ambition."

Perhaps the most difficult point was, in this age with starkly different drawing technologies and attitudes towards manga production, what would Tezuka Osamu draw… He might become a completely different artist from the Tezuka Osamu that we think of. Aside from the matter of innovation, there was also the matter of the human rights of mangaka and publishers, which we think fondly of in the present day. But if the works of the past could only be produced as a result of those extreme conditions, then I could only conclude that it was something AI was unable to reproduce.

"Personally, rather than just the art style, I'm curious as to how well it can recreate his writing style. Even if the AI Tezuka Osamu's manga were to be adapted into an anime, if it doesn't personally work on the anime, it wouldn't be Tezuka Osamu."

"Well, Tezuka-sensei may do as he pleases."

“You’re the one that sounds like an AI.”

Although, an AI Sengoku Nadeko didn’t seem like it would be very decent.

At least, the four Sengoku Nadekos were like that.

“Also, there’s also the limitation that the AI Tezuka Osamu shouldn’t be allowed to produce a work more interesting than those of the real Tezuka Osamu.”

“Ahaha. There’s no need to worry about that. That would be impossible for even the most sophisticated of AI.”

“If the robot uprising were to ever occur, you’ll be the first to be deleted. Actually, when the AI Tezuka Osamu is completed, there’ll be no room for you to enter the world of manga.”

“Urk… When that happens, I’m sure the AI Sengoku Nadeko will be there to inherit my will.”

“If it inherits your will, it’ll become the assistant of the AI Tezuka Osamu, right? But if you have the fighting spirit to surpass gods, then maybe your parents will say ‘anything but a mangaka’ with a different meaning? A girl who could become ‘anything, but’ had to become a mangaka,”

said Ononoki-chan.

She was probably trying to cheer me on.

However, if I told them about an ambition like that, then I felt like they would just say, “Then, let’s start by aiming to be a doctor”... Although, I would’ve liked it if my parents had been at least that considerate.

“Huh. So she had this many holes in her—it’s like she fell onto hell’s mountain of needles. It’s worse than I thought. A normal curse reversal wouldn’t end up like this… It might be possible that she ended up cursing herself.”

“Cursing herself?”

“Even if she acts with the arrogance and audacity of a queen, if she’s always irritated, her life won’t exactly be pleasant—if things always go the way you want them to, then even the slightest stress can become unbearable. And she wouldn’t be able to feel better without a minion like you to take it out on.”

A minion?

What an incredible word to use.

“But, you know, whether it’s with Tooboe Nakuna or Araragi Tsukihi, you sure love hanging out with arrogant friends. Rather than a minion, you might have the disposition to be small fry.”[130]

“I don’t have such an awful disposition…”

Though it was a viewpoint that was hard for me to deny.

I was embarrassed to be described with words like minion or small fry, but it was a fact that, in elementary school, Sengoku Nadeko

had the inclination to try and get in under the umbrellas of powerful people.

Thinking about it now, the Fire Sisters' advisor, Tsukihi-chan, was the very example of that. When I was in second grade, I humbly leapt into the arms of that powerful person, not knowing that I was actually throwing myself into the fire.

"It's not that you're being chosen for the entourage for the sake of appearances. Ecologically speaking, when a creature like you tries to get close to a powerful person, it's like a certificate of pedigree for them. 'If a sharksucker is attached to them, then that person must be a shark.' That's the idea."

"That's a terrible way to put it."

"Also, a sharksucker isn't even a shark itself."[131]

"On top of being a sucker, it's not even a shark…"

I felt like I'd heard that exchange before in the commentary tracks…

Was it a relative of the sea bream?

Even if it's rotten, it's still a sea bream. Even if it's a sharksucker, it's still a sea bream.[132]

"It's a similar kind of isolationism, but it's a different lifestyle compared to *oni* onii-chan, or for short, *oni*i-chan. When it came to going under someone's protection or entering their territory, you were never particularly negative about it. Your ability to sniff out the strong was first-class. But if we go there, then *oni*i-chan treated the idea of flocking together as defeat. Even now, he remains alone at his university."

That seemed different from what I'd heard before.

So he was alone even at his university…

"Perhaps I admired those types of people. But, of course I would have a powerful desire to live quietly and comfortably under the authority of powerful people…"

"You really had such a desire? That's outrageous."

Personally, if you end up like that, then it's over for you—said Ononoki-chan. As someone who'd spent a long time sharing a room with Tsukihi-chan as a freeloader in the Araragi household, her words had a lot of weight to them, monotone as they were.

"In terms of *Doraemon*, you'd be like Suneo-kun, huh? Hesitating over whether to enter Gian's protection, or Doraemon's protection. Plus, it's not like Doraemon can keep watch over you in school."

"True. It's huge to have someone you can rely on in class."

"So basically, rather than Suneo, you're Sunemi."

"That's a character from *Chimpui*."

Was there a Gian-like character in *Chimpui*?

“Although, I did suffer a lot of damage from being invited into Nakuna-chan’s entourage, and in the end, Nakuna-chan herself fell from that position.”

“She was just reaping what she sowed. Or should I say, she was caught in her own trap? Though it’s a snake, rather than a trap.[133] So, was it an anticlimax—or rather, was it a great success?”[134]

Ononoki-chan asked rather brusquely.

From her point of view, since she had never met Nakuna-chan directly and had no emotional attachment to her, there was absolutely no reason for her to sympathize with her.

I said, “Yep,” and nodded.

“When I finished my drawing with Nakuna-chan as the model, all the holes vanished from her body, with not a single one remaining—but would it be an oxymoron to say that the holes vanished? Or a false report?”[135]

The snake’s bite marks had completely disappeared.

From her face, from her neck, from her chest, from her arms. And most likely, from beneath her patient gown and the blanket, too. Her holes and her openings, they were all wrapped up together and sealed in the sketchbook—of course, in reality, nothing happened.

It wasn’t as though she herself had been unaware. It was simply that the traces of that giant snake were something only I could see, and I had just put that optical illusion, that hallucination, into a drawing.

Just tilting at windmills, so to speak.

It was even doubtful if the curse was even lifted—perhaps all it did was make her feel a little better, and Nakuna-chan’s hospitalization would have to continue for a while longer.

“Of course, it’s not an easy knot to untangle.[136] The end of that rope is connected with Araundo, after all—but, isn’t it enough if she feels a little better? Considering everything she’s done to you.”

“Considering everything she’s done to me, then yeah. But, considering everything she’s done *for* me, it’s not like there’s no room to think about the extenuating circumstances.”

As I said that, it felt a bit hypocritical.

Well, not just a bit.

Because it wasn’t as though I’d come to visit a former friend of my own volition—if it hadn’t been for Gaen-san’s instructions, who would willingly go to such a meeting… Even though it would surely result in a bitter aftertaste and a bad mood, no matter how it played out.

The reason I drew with Nakuna-chan as the model was not as training to become a mangaka or even a courtroom sketch artist, but as training to become a specialist like Ononoki-chan under Gaen-san’s

guidance.

"I'm thrilled that you chose me as your objective. It makes me want to do everything I can to help you."

As she said that, Ononoki-chan tore out the relevant page from the sketchbook—as if sealing it away, she folded it twice and put it in her pocket.

"Well, Gaen-san isn't trying to raise you up, Nade*kou*, into a power-based character like me. My 'Unlimited Rulebook' is never going to be able to lift that kind of curse reversal like you… At best, all I can do is add another large hole to her body."

Like burying a hole with a larger hole.

Although in Ononoki-chan's case, it would be a physical hole.

"Phew…"

In any case, I did all that I could. I did my best. Though it does make me think, "Good grief"...[137] It didn't really matter if Nakuna-chan was forgiven by me or continued to be resented by me, but for how things would go for her from now on, it was up to Nakuna-chan herself.

"Then, shall we go back, Ononoki-chan? Let's throw ourselves on the bed and eat ice cream without using spoons."

"That's an invitation as sweet as ice cream, but don't act like you've forgotten, Nade*kou*."

Like dry ice, Ononoki-chan spread her arms wide to block my path forward (path backward?). Her being a tween girl made that movement kind of cute, but I couldn't forget that those arms held a strength that could blow this hospital to smithereens.

"There's one more person you have to visit, right? One more person you have to meet and lift the curse from—it's very convenient that they've been admitted to the same hospital."

Actually, it was extremely inconvenient.

However, now that she'd told me, it was unavoidable.

If I've eaten snake's poison, I may as well lick the plate.[138]

Resolving myself, I turned on my heel and headed for the room where the other person to curse me last year, Sajou Sunshi-kun, was hospitalized—as a courtroom sketch artist, or perhaps, as a specialist.

"So? The classmate that confessed to you and then cursed you in retaliation when you rejected him, the sports star, Sajou Sunshi-kun—did he not apologize to you, in the end?"

"Yeah—well, he did apologize, you see? He did apologize, but then he said something like, 'Sorry, sorry. But Sengoku, it's partly your fault, right? I apologized, so you'd better properly apologize, too.'"

It was a visit that wasn't the least bit refreshing, leaving me with a hazy feeling… It might have even been a more unpleasant and tortuous conversation than the visit with Nakuna-chan.

The unbalanced nature of him promptly apologizing and then demanding a formal apology from me really didn't make any sense, even as I remembered it now, after quite the number of days had passed.

It irritated me every time I thought about it.

"Ha ha. Each person has their own subjectivity, after all. Perhaps the way Sunshi-kun sees it, he was seduced by you, a wicked girl, and then ended up riddled with holes as a result."

Though I had never done anything like seducing him.

It was completely baseless.

And, to call me a wicked girl… Though I'd been referred to as a last boss before.

Because of the thing with Nakuna-chan, I had actually turned him down rather decisively considering the kind of person I had been at the time… If that ended up being bad, then yes, maybe Ougi-san's words were right.

"There's etiquette to rejecting people, I guess."

"That's right. Sengoku-chan, he must have been left bewildered by your stubborn behavior after he thought you would be easy. More than just a chance, he thought he had ten chances with you, so of course a playboy like him wouldn't stay put after you gave him the cold shoulder."

"I don't think your words are *that* right. But, hmm… I can't help but think about why, of the two people that cursed me, both of them ended up riddled with holes."

"It's amazing to hear that you're thinking about something, Sengoku-chan."

"Do you take me for an idiot?"

"At the very least, your life plan isn't exactly sensible. To start living on your own even before graduating from middle school, and to aim to become a courtroom sketch artist."

Perhaps I'll dabble in courtroom sketches for a bit.

Want me to draw you? Defendant, Oshino Ougi?

"Give me a break. If you were to draw me, I might end up vanishing, like being sucked into a black hole. But Sengoku-chan, shouldn't you explain what the situation was at the time? There might be readers that have started from this volume."

"Would, would there really…?"

What mistakes would they have made to begin reading from the fourth volume of Monster Season?—but, well, for the sake of reviewing the material myself, I may as well go over it.

Last year, I'd been cursed by two snakes at the same time—naturally, the two people that had set those snakes were Nakuna-chan and Sunshi-kun.

I was cursed at the same time from two different directions.

Nakuna-chan couldn't forgive the fact that me, a lower-class minion and small fry, was confessed to by the boy she liked; Sunshi-kun couldn't forgive the fact that a girl that seemed easy to him rejected his confession. Thus, each of them cast their own curses.

They hadn't arranged things beforehand. It had simply been trendy at the time.

Those sorts of "charms", at Nanahyakuichi Middle School—not just "charms" relating to romance, but lots of different variants like "raising your grades" and "improving your reflexes". Basically, they were "charms" aimed towards middle school students.

The majority of those were harmless, just "merchandise" that were charms in name only, but mixed in were several "real ones"—in my case, they doubled up.

"Ha ha. Rather than 'real ones', it's more like they were 'fakes'. Inferior goods of low quality. However, out of the two snakes that were coiled around you, Sengoku-chan, one of them was completely purified by the talisman that Meme-oji-san gave you, right? There should have been only one snake that didn't get exterminated and got away… So why is it that both the boy and the girl were equally hit by the curse reversal?"

"I can only think that the two of them cursed more than just me… Otherwise, they would be way too hole-ridden for them to have been bitten by just the one snake that returned."

Ononoki-chan had brought up the idea that the victim had cursed themselves, and perhaps that wasn't impossible for the two of them, but from my estimations, it felt like they would need to be cursed by dozens of people to end up like that.

That would mean that I wasn't particularly special to them… I wasn't her irreplaceable right hand, and I wasn't his fated partner connected by a red string.

I was no more than one of the many classmates that had been innumerably, or even indiscriminately, cursed.

Or perhaps, they may have just decided to try out the “charms” that they paid money for, without any real reason to do so… Like testing out the sharpness of a knife. And, among the many classmates cursed by Nakuna-chan or Sunshi-kun, there was probably someone that had been more capable of handling it—if anything, I had been the one to fail miserably after teaching myself to deal with it.

By attempting self-help using the knowledge from browsing at a bookstore, I’d amplified the amount of harm I received.

“You don’t need to abase yourself that much, Sengoku-chan. Because of that self-reliance, you were able to reunite with Koyomi-onii-chan and Tsukihi-chan, right?”

“But now, I’ve already let go of him, so that’s not really something I can be glad about…”

Our relationship had begun from a strange twist of fate, huh.

However—and this was the main point of concern—the snake that had failed to be purified should have gotten away and returned to either Nakuna-chan or Sunshi-kun, but in the end, it seemed things would be resolved without learning who.

“I see. Until we learn whether or not you were able to carry out your revenge, it certainly won’t be very refreshing. It would leave me with a hazy feeling.”

“That’s not the reason why this isn’t refreshing!”

“But, well, if both of them ended up in that tattered state now, then that’s enough for me to refreshingly think, ‘Serves you right!’ It’s exhilarating. There’s nothing more refreshing than this.”

It seemed that the less I felt that way, the more Ougi-san would feel that way to make up for it… Really, he was like a high school boy personifying the back sides of people.

Or, a high school boy (?).

“Even if it was under Gaen-san’s guidance, you shouldn’t have bothered lifting their curses.”

Was this fellow aware that, if I really wanted to plot revenge, he would be the target of it…?

“Yes, I’m aware. So that’s why, in order to overthrow humanity… Er, in order to atone for my sins[139], I’m letting you use me as an errand boy.”

Did he just say, overthrow humanity?

Was he saying he was the Demon King or something?

Trembling in fear, I accepted the rolling suitcase from Ougi-san. It was oversized luggage fitting as much as sixty liters, meant for particularly long trips, but inside were the manuscripts that I had drawn long ago.

When I left home, I'd carelessly forgotten about my closet… I was calling it "leaving home", but I'd essentially run away after a big argument with my parents, so I'd basically left everything unattended to, taking with me only a pen and a sketchbook.

Like some Showa-era novelist.

That happened at the start of the year.

I'd been able to avoid talking to my parents about what I would do after graduation, but we had all become careless over the New Year's holidays… As a result, I'd ended up starting to live by myself much earlier than I'd originally planned.

The lease that I'd signed thanks to Gaen-san's influence after the events of last time started in January, which made things worse… After all, I was the type of person to run away more easily if there was a place I could run to.

Incidentally, Ononoki-chan came with me.

That girl can be a bit snappy, but I could tell she really loves me.

But then, I remembered what I'd left behind—or rather, more than anything else, I didn't dare want to leave those manuscripts under my parents' noses. But I couldn't go back and get them myself, so there was no one else but Ougi-san I could ask for help.

Well, to be precise, I'd asked Tsukihi-chan first, but she refused.

"Refusing something like that is what makes Tsukihi-chan Tsukihi-chan, isn't it? Ha ha."

"Was it all right? Nobody saw you, right?"

"I'd been planning on dropping by after finishing what I was doing with Kanbaru-senpai, but because I had to accompany Koyomi-onii-chan, I ended up dropping the spare key you lent me. Since no one was home, I broke a window to get in, but as I was rummaging around, your parents returned much earlier than I expected, so I had to knock them out to escape."

He did everything that he shouldn't have.

He knocked out my parents…

There was a limit to how much of a scoundrel you could be.

"I'm joking. It was all a lie."

"I hope so…"

"Aside from dropping the spare key."

"If that's true, then that means you breaking a window is true, too!"

Don't act even more destructive than Ononoki-chan at my parents' home—incidentally, the place where I was talking to Ougi-san like this was a place not too far from my parents' home, the famous Shirohebi Park.

The apartment that Gaen-san had introduced me to was located in a great spot near the capital (by capital, I wasn't talking about Tokyo—my hometown's downtown area was called the capital by us locals), but I'd come a great distance today to pick up my luggage.

Even though I didn't want to see my parents, I couldn't ask Ougi-san to come all the way to the capital, so I made a small return to my hometown.

An empty-handed, triumphant return.

"I was surprised at how much you had. You sure are prolific, Sengoku-chan. I'll lend you the suitcase, so you can just take the whole thing back. It's the least I can give you as a farewell gift, for you about to walk the path of an outlaw."

"Um, thanks…"

It certainly seemed like a sturdy suitcase that could handle the most uneven of roads… I was afraid that its sturdy appearance would make it look like it was filled with cash.

Though it only contained my rough scribbles.

When I thought about how he brought over this giant suitcase in the sidecar of his BMX, I realized I'd been rather thoughtless in my request.

"B-but, I can't accept something that seems so expensive."

"Don't worry about it. This is left over from when I used to imitate my uncle and do all sorts of fieldwork here and there. There's no reason for me to do any traveling anymore, so I'll be glad if you could inherit it, Sengoku-chan."

Oh, well, in that case.

Though I couldn't shake the feeling that he was just foisting onto me something that just took up space and was hard to get rid of… Though Ougi-san had given off the impression of being a wandering transfer student, had he finally decided to put down roots in this town?

It was the exact opposite of me.

"Not to mention, the exact opposite of that Koyomi-onii-chan, who has also left this town. Like the front and the back. That reminds me, Tsukihi-chan was angry that you left without telling her at all, Sengoku-chan. If you'd like, then after this, let's go and apologize to her."

"No, no, no, no!"

So that's why she refused me…

When I'd called her, she didn't seem that way in the slightest, and she'd refused with the same cheery tone of voice as always, but yikes. So that was what she was like when she was really mad.

It wasn't a simple comparison, but ultimately, Tsukihi-chan

was far scarier than Nakuna-chan.

Although, after Tsukihi-chan refused me, the fact that I had no choice but to rely on Ougi-san, whom I had no direct connections to… It really showed how poor my personal connections were.

I felt awkward relying on the professional Ononoki-chan for my errands, too—but even if Ougi-san took on the job as a form of atoning for his sins (or overthrowing humanity), he wasn't doing it for free.

Even if he had quit traveling, it seemed his habit of performing fieldwork had not gone away, as he requested a story from me in exchange for running my errand.

Of the current circumstances, I suppose.

Or of my nostalgic reconciliation tour that had happened last summer—although, in the end, there had been no such reconciliation, and I hadn't heard from them for months after that.

I didn't even know if the two of them had been discharged.

And I myself had left home…

"That's fine as it is. I'm sure not even Gaen-san actually wanted you to reconcile with your old friends—sheesh, not even I can read her true intentions."

Right.

Considering her amiable disposition that could get her to make friends with anyone, it was possible that she wanted to seriously intervene in the squabbles of kids, but that was secondary, or even tertiary, to our goal.

The primary goal was, ultimately.

The collection—of the curses.

"It seemed she wanted some samples. Of the snake's curse."

It was quite an important task, and I was sure that (even if it was outside Ononoki-chan's area of expertise) Gaen-san had any number of talented people who were suited for it, but as specialists, they probably wouldn't bother entering those hospital rooms for free, especially if they weren't requests.

As such, she connected it to my training, or perhaps she was connecting me to my old friends—with that level of ability, her caliber as head honcho was much more imposing than Nakuna-chan or Tsukihi-chan.

"On the other hand, maybe Gaen-san considered it a case so serious that she had no choice but to mobilize you, who's just a specialist apprentice."

That was Ougi-san's analysis.

Aha, I hadn't thought of it like that—how discerning of him. No wonder he only ever suffered a crushing defeat from Gaen-san.

"Who are you saying suffered a crushing defeat? You could just

as easily say that I won that round."

He was surprisingly bothered by that.

I didn't exactly know the details of the battle that had occurred between Ougi-san and Gaen-san… Ononoki-chan would probably tell me if I asked her, but I didn't feel the need to go out of my way to learn about it.

"Personally, I would call it a tie. In other words, a draw."

"It's pretty muddy[140], how bothered you are by that…"

"At any rate, it's true that we've reached a conclusion, or rather, we've drawn the line. Not with Koyomi-onii-chan, but between me and Gaen-san—after all, I'm not under protection, but under surveillance. If you see it from that point of view, Sengoku-chan, then didn't you draw the line, too? Between you and your former friend, and between you and your former boyfriend."

"Calling him my former boyfriend is wrong, and calling her my former friend is also a little wrong—"

Not that I wanted to say that she was still my friend. Rather, I wanted to explain that it was doubtful whether or not she was even my friend in the past.

But it was wrong to glorify the notion of friendship, too—it was more like a mutually beneficial relationship.

However, I was reluctant to agree to the idea that I'd drawn the line between us. As I've already said, a hazy feeling still lingered within me, making me constantly wonder if I could've done things better.

"Ha ha. Maybe what you're feeling is regret, or even guilt, that you've arbitrarily and unconscientiously turned a blind eye to wicked people that should really never be forgiven?"

"Aah. Maybe that's it…"

"In that sense, deciding whether to forgive or not to forgive isn't something you can do superficially. Because it's possible to forgive not because you're generous, not because you're broad-minded, but simply because you're weak—because you're weak, you can't condemn. You're simply forgiving them for your own interests. 'I can't forgive him for what he's done, but I have to forgive him for the sake of the future.' 'If I forgive him now, it'll help me out later on.' There are many such cases—the pattern where it's not the person apologizing who's giving in, but the person forgiving who's giving in. Even if a court tells you to 'reconcile', it's not like you're actually consenting to making peace with them, right? This is like the back side of the '*ayamarei*'."

"The '*ayamarei*'?"

"Koyomi-onii-chan's enemy this time around. His bonus story is included in this volume."

“That part’s the bonus story?”

“He managed to pull through this time, but, well, it’s the kind of oddity that you have to keep an eye on for the rest of your life.”

My, my. He’s as active as ever.

Judging from the name, it must be an apparition that had something to do with apologies.

“That’s right. If anything, it’s like a law that I would want to have enacted on your former friend and former boyfriend—but even if they were to apologize from the bottom of their hearts for their past wrongdoings, it’s a different matter entirely as to whether or not you would forgive them, right?”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“Sengoku-chan, you’ve experienced how tough it is to forgive someone who isn’t really repenting for their actions. But what if they’d repented a bit and were regretting their actions? Even though you would want to get even more angry, you would have no choice to forgive them, and that can make you feel pretty hazy, too.”

Ah.

It was true that, if Nakuna-chan or Sunshi-kun had hung their heads and professed a heartfelt apology, I probably would not have been able to hide my anger.

It was possible I’d say something like, even though you did all those things, you think you can just resolve everything with an apology?

“You might go into Anti-Nadeko mode and say something like, ‘Y’think you have the right to repent or reform, hmmm!?’”

“Your imitation is pretty good… And I really could say that.”

But, thinking about that imitation objectively, the question becomes, what exactly were you supposed to do?

You wouldn’t be forgiven whether you apologized or not, and you wouldn’t be forgiven whether you repented or reformed, so what would you need to do to make up for your actions? If you bow your head, they’ll say that there’s no meaning to that pose, and if you try to pay money, they’ll just say that this isn’t a matter that can be resolved with money—atoning for your sins.

Just as humanity has survived the history of the Earth without being overthrown, could sins not be atoned for?

“Hmm. The idea that you won’t be satisfied until you condemn the other party to the point of ruin… Now that’s sinful in itself. Being the side that condemns is also a burden to bear. After all, you’re bringing resentment and hatred as shadows into your heart.”

That was true.

It did feel like Gaen-san had unnecessarily dragged things back up.

Like piling salt on top of an old wound.

"For Nakuna-chan, it did make me feel hazy when I remembered her, but for Sunshi-kun, I'd pretty much forgotten everything about him—even though I barely realized who he was from hearing his name, meeting him directly made me feel hazy all over again."

"That's awful, and it was probably a similar feeling for them, too, but Nadeko-chan, if you were to condemn Gaen-san for that, I'm sure she would easily apologize. With a formal apology. And when she does, you'll be faced with another choice. When that adult apologizes to you in a friendly way, will you helplessly forgive her, or stubbornly refuse to forgive her?"

"...I'd have to helplessly forgive her."

I was only able to run away from home right now because I was being supported by Gaen-san… She was the one that had introduced me to my current place of residence, and I could only make ends meet because of the specialist training that she was giving me. A fifteen-year-old middle schooler living on her own was unreasonable, but it was only made possible thanks to her personal connections… If I were to sever ties with her, I'd end up out on the streets… In order to maintain my current relationship with Gaen-san, forgiving her with a vagueness like, "Ah, um, well, I'm not really that mad…" would be the only form of resistance I could take.

Even now, I lived under the umbrella of a powerful person…

"Ha ha. In that sense, Koyomi-onii-chan really is incredible. He cut ties with Gaen-san without a second thought, so now he's magnificently living his life out on the streets."

"So that could happen…"

It might sound heartless to say it this way, but from the bottom of my heart, I hoped that it wouldn't come to that. Of course, there was no such thing as cutting ties with Gaen-san through sheer willpower—that's why it'll weigh on you even after that.

But it seemed she had calculated everything… Putting me in a situation where I would have to forgive her, regardless of whatever I thought—it was heartbreaking to realize that I'd have to give in for my own interests.

However, there's another way to think about it.

It's actually kind of a relief, in a way, to know that you have a pretext to forgive someone that's hard to forgive. The excuse that I didn't give in out of my own volition could serve as a cast and crutches for me later on.

That naturally applied to Gaen-san, but even in the case of Nakuna-chan and Sunshi-kun, if it hadn't been for my specialist training, it was very likely I wouldn't have been able to forgive them,

even if they had apologized… I see, then in that case, it was as Ougi-san said. I may have drawn a line in between us.

It's not like you had to forgive her—that was what Ononoki-chan had said, but it may be true that forgiving allowed you to proceed forward.

In terms of whether you were helped or harmed, you would be harmed, but in terms of profit and loss, it was a profit.

At the very least, if I continued to hate, resent, and curse Nakuna-chan and Sunshi-kun, it wouldn't provide any sort of fuel for me.

"Right. Not to mention the concern that, if any grudges were to be left behind in your emotions, Nadeko-chan, you might become a god again—Gaen-san was probably trying to keep that in check, too. When you have a huge job ahead of you, you want to take away any risk factors."

"When you say that, I guess I can't refute it."

"I suppose the lesson here is, if you're seeking forgiveness, then instead of apologizing sincerely, you should have the forethought to provide a pretext to forgive. It would have been nice if that unforgiving *ayamarei* that tormented Koyomi-onii-chan so much came with such a clause—that wouldn't be an interpretation of the law, but an amendment to it. On the other hand, it might be brilliant to act like Tsukihi and make them think, 'It'll be useless no matter how much I get mad at them,' in order to be forgiven."

"That wouldn't be brilliant at all."

It barely made sense.

With that as the punch line, Ougi-san said, "Then, the delivery is complete," and sat back on his bicycle.

"Thanks for telling me about your past. It was very interesting—oh, that reminds me. There are people that hold the opinion that your friends or your family are those that you have to grit your teeth and forgive, even if they've done something unforgivable."

"That's not an opinion I can get behind. Don't bring it up like it's something heartwarming."

It was no longer possible for me to be unconditionally moved by the word "family".

"Speaking of which, it's been quite a while since you reunited with your former friend and former boyfriend, but even after the passing of those days and months, the changing of the seasons, and the start of the new year, you still haven't been approached by Gaen-san?"

"Ah, yeah… I've been constantly receiving a bunch of annoying assignments through Ononoki-chan, but there hasn't been anything new on *that* front. It's possible that I was cut from the job."

Maybe the sketches I'd passed along through Ononoki-chan weren't of any use… No, to wonder if they were of any use sounded too much like the occupational disease of a courtroom sketch artist aspirant.

"Although you're not actually employed. So it's a non-occupational disease."

Saying that, Ougi-chan handed me some metallic object from atop his bike—perhaps, as a high school boy, he was giving a runaway middle school girl like me some pocket change, but what he'd actually given me was a key.

It was the spare key he had said he dropped.

"Ha ha. There's no way I'd drop the spare key that you entrusted with me, Sengoku-chan."

"Oh… C'mon. No more bad jokes, Ougi-san."

"Sorry, sorry. Will you forgive me?"

"Well, this isn't something you really need to apologize for… So basically, when you said that you broke a window to get into our home, that was also a joke, right?"

005

Since I had come all the way here, I thought I'd wander around my hometown for a bit before going back home, but on the off chance that I was caught by the network of a truly angry Tsukihi-chan, I'd have no hope of resisting (even if the Fire Sisters had broken up, they were still the face of the town—they hadn't stepped down from their seat of power), so after parting ways with Ougi-san, I decided to head straight back to the capital.

With a real helter-skelter feeling.

Well, that was just in terms of how I felt, but the reality was not as light as I made it sound. The huge suitcase, whether I was walking, riding a train, or riding the bus, was still oversized luggage. Even if it weren't for Tsukihi-chan, it certainly would not have been sane to wander around my hometown with something like this. It was a good thing I was braless.

Or rather, maybe I should've just had it sent cash on delivery… Well, there was no particular reason for it, but it felt a bit dangerous to have Ougi-san learn my current address. Well, no matter how cautious I was against someone like that, it was probably meaningless…

In the first place, the goal of this retrieval was to make sure I didn't leave behind traces of my desire to be a courtroom sketch artist in the hands of my parents (though you could say I'd left home because I'd failed to do so), but since I'd already accomplished my goal, I could just throw them away in a trash can somewhere, or bury them on a mountain, or burn them on a riverbank, but no, no, that would be going too far.

As Ononoki-chan would put it, it was like my dark history, but I wasn't quite willing to act as though my past didn't exist—they might just be scribbles I'd stockpiled over time, but if it weren't for these practice pieces, I might still be reigning at the Kitashirahebi Shrine even now. Perhaps, a thousand years from now, the contents of this suitcase could be a vital source of information for the sake of programming an AI Sengoku Nadeko.

With those thoughts running through my head, I returned home with my large collection of drawings in tow.

"Goodness. You sure are well-prepared to have gotten a suitcase already, Sengoku. You're pretty motivated for someone about to head to a danger zone. I'm glad. My excitement is also off-the-charts."

In front of my apartment building was Ononoki-chan. It was a building without an elevator, so I'd been planning on borrowing the

strength of that power-based character from this point on, and this saved me the effort of calling her. However, the one that called out to me was not the eyepatch-wearing doll (Ononoki-chan referred to me as "Nade*kou*", or sometimes "Nade*koushaku*"141).

It was the one standing next to Ononoki-chan.

A man of high stature, clad in a suit fit for a funeral that was blacker than the night, darker than the darkness—even though the sun hadn't set just yet, his presence made the surroundings seem gloomier and chillier. An ominous specialist.

Even so, it was the first time I'd met this person in full dress, so to speak—

"Ka–Ka–Kaiko-san."

"It's Kaiki."

Right, Kaiki-san. Kaiki Deishuu-san.

I remember, okay?

About this time last year, he was the specialist that had reverted me from a snake god to a human—a specialist, and a con man. Like Oshino-san or Kagenui-san, he was a member of Gaen-san's faction—or was he?

If anything, he was more like a lone wolf… But still, when he stood lined up next to Ononoki-chan (who was officially Kagenui-san's shikigami), they really looked good.

Not that the combination of an old man and a tween girl was really to my liking… To be honest, my memory of those days weren't very clear, but it was certainly the case that I'd never had the chance to thank him after that happened.

But our sudden reunion most likely had not been arranged to give me the opportunity to thank Kaiki-san—nor to give me the opportunity to apologize for almost killing him.

That was my hunch from seeing Ononoki-chan's expression. Though she was expressionless.

"Sorry that it seems like I'm ambushing you, Sengoku. But this house-sitting doll refused to let me inside—what do you think about her treating me, your benefactor, as a criminal?"

"Th-that's because, Kaiki-san, before you were my benefactor, you really were a criminal…"

"You tell him, Nade*kou*. Tell him how you were cursed by multiple people as a result of the 'charms' that he sold to middle schoolers for a quick profit."

Ononoki-chan was openly displeased.

They may look good when lined up together, but it seemed they weren't really on good terms… But, that was true.

From Nakuna-chan's curse and Sunshi-kun's curse, if we traced it back to the source, we'd run into this con man—in addition,

Tsukihi-chan's sister Karen-chan had also been bedridden for a time due to the curse that Kaiki-san had cast upon her.

I would have to be way too generous to greet him warmly after that.

"Don't be too bothered by all that stuff from the past, Sengoku. You sure are small-minded, though I was the one to revert that mind back to being human."

Kaiki-san shrugged with a "Good grief".

He was acting as though he was dealing with a spoiled child, but it was just an example of the guilty being audacious—when it came to a trueborn criminal, he was definitely on another level from Nakuna-chan or Sunshi-kun or even Tsukihi-chan.

To say nothing of condemning me, he was condescending…

If I had carelessly tried to thank him, he probably would have demanded reward money. Even though I was a runaway, destitute middle schooler.

When all's said and done, it was undeniable that Kaiki-san had saved me, so with the limited knowledge of morality I'd heard of, I'd been thinking that I needed to thank him when we reunited, but now that we'd actually reunited like this, all it did was make me mad.

As mad as a snake.[142]

"No, no, don't look at me with those eyes, those snake eyes. It'll make me sad. All that stuff was my bad, I'm sincerely repenting for them. I'm truly sorry. Everything was my fault. Okay, with that, everything's resolved."

"Ononoki-chan, send that guy flying."

"Understood, Master."

"Your master isn't even Sengoku."

Ononoki-chan really did take on the stance of using "Unlimited Rulebook", so, as if to dodge her fingertip, Kaiki-san took a step closer to me.

Good grief. For this guy, not even the "*ayamarei*" that Ougi-san brought up seemed like it could work.

But really, when an actual criminal appeared before me, then about forgiving or not forgiving, about apologizing or not apologizing, all those discussions we had quickly became meaningless.

It felt like nothing more than wordplay.

"Don't flatter yourself, Sengoku. The affection that Ononoki shows towards you is likely just a manifestation of your love towards yourself. After all, this is just a doll that is extremely influenced by her surroundings."

What an unpleasant thing to point out.

To think that the truth behind Ononoki-chan loving me was really me loving myself… To say something so unpleasant that it was

actually reverse empowerment. Nakuna-chan or Tsukihi-chan couldn't even begin to compare.

If anything, I thought I didn't have that much self-love… But I didn't know for sure. After all, it was me.

"But even so—I hardly recognized you. In just one year."

"? Are you talking about my hair?"

"No. I foresaw your hair being like that."

Yeah, right.

What a meaningless lie to tell.

"And I may as well thank you in advance for avenging me and taking out my enemy. I can't have you demanding money from me later."

"? Your enemy?"

"It's not something you need to know, Nade*kou*."

An information embargo had been placed on me.

If Ononoki-chan, who loved me so much was saying that, then I probably didn't need to know, or I was better off not knowing… But it did make me curious when they openly kept it secret from me.

"Just tell her the news already. You've heard from Gaen-san, right, Kaiki onii-chan."

So she called him Kaiki onii-chan.

Weirdly enough, it made his likability increase.

"From Gaen-san?"

If it was the next step in my training, then she could've just gone through Ononoki-chan or contacted me directly… In that case, did that mean Kaiki-san wasn't just a messenger?

Though it seemed that Ononoki-chan had already heard…

"Yes. Because of the matter with you, I ended up being excommunicated by Gaen-senpai… But I've been told that if I cooperate with your training, I'll be able to make amends with her faction, so I jumped at this fortuitous opportunity. If it's for Gaen-senpai's sake, money means nothing to me. I'll work at no cost."

It seemed a large sum of money had passed behind the scenes.

And he'd mentioned it quite nonchalantly, but when he suggested that he'd been cut off by Gaen-san because of me, it was hard to dig into that… I suppose that was the technique of a con man.

But it turned out that Gaen-san cut ties with a surprising number of people, huh.

Perhaps those two that had been cut off had something in common.

"Plus, I was worried about what happened to you after that."

"You really are telling nothing but lies…"

"No, no, I'm serious. I've been so plagued with worry that you got back together with Koyomi-onii-chan, or you turned back into a

god, that it kept me awake and whistling at night."

You're going to cause snakes to appear.[143]

But it seems he generally thought of me as unreliable.

"I suppose the lesson to be learned here is, 'Children will grow even without parents'—or perhaps, 'Once you part with a gentleman for three days, you should view him with new eyes.'"

I was a lady, though.

Also, don't try to force yourself into the position of my father, you curse originator.

"That's it,"

said Kaiki-san.

"When you call me a curse originator, the fact of the matter is that I was but an insignificant retail store. I made forgeries of the curses that I'd acquired, and then simply mass-produced them cheaply."

"It would've been better if you died, though."

The interjection from the specialist in immortal oddities was scathing. Pretending he didn't hear it, Kaiki-san continued.

"But if we trace back that serpentine line back to the very beginning, we'll find ourselves coming full circle to Araundo,"

he said—Araundo.

The huge, five-headed snake—Araundo Uroko.

"That was why Gaen-senpai had you retrieve those curses. To ascertain the origin of the snake curses that I had been responsible for spreading, so to speak."

In order to find the snake's headquarters.

And round them up in one go.

I inhaled sharply at Kaiki-san's words… I hadn't realized such a magnificent plan was hiding in her intervention in the discord between me and my classmates.

"Someone like Araundo is a snake that I have zero connection to, but because of the circumstances, I've found myself taking command of our little team."

More like you're way too connected. You're a related party!

But, taking command… Of me… And Ononoki-chan? When I glanced at her, the tween girl was silently nodding—at some point, Ononoki-chan and I had become capable of communicating with just an exchange of looks.

But even so, it was quite a bizarre team…

A con man, a courtroom sketch artist aspirant, and a corpse doll.

It sounded like we'd pull off some theatrical-level heist.

But aha. I thought we'd been leaving the matter with Nakuna-chan and Sunshi-kun hanging for quite some time, but it turned out

that Gaen-san hadn't been just playing around.

For one, she had used the clue I'd recovered to track down the target's hideout… For another, she'd found her junior who had been excommunicated and had escaped, and she'd negotiated with him.

Meanwhile, I had just been messily arguing with my parents…

"For the team name, how about Hypocrisy Co., Ltd.?"

"I feel like I remember that name being used before."

But don't include me in your ring of crime.

I'm trying to become a courtroom sketch artist…

And while it wasn't my place to try and understand the mind of Gaen-san, who I was much obliged to… When looking at this team composition, it didn't feel like that head honcho had planned anything at all.

Obviously I was just an apprentice, but with the excommunicated Kaiki-san as the leader, and including Ononoki-chan who was still going through discipline with one eye being confiscated… It was the very definition of a sacrificial team that could be discarded when push came to shove.

A paper team with no real substance.

Normally, in times like these, we should be forming some sort of dream team, but this was more like a nightmare team… Even if my signature move was to suck up to powerful people, I couldn't help but hesitate at the thought of going in under this umbrella. To be obsequious towards a con man made me too much of a scoundrel myself, didn't it?

Also, we just have to take the team name and the team composition as given?

"You can't just suddenly spring this on me, Kaiki-san. I don't exactly have free time—well, actually, I'm extremely free, but I was going to use that free time for my startup plans. I wanted to draw a hundred fifty pages of storyboards this month."

"Dispose of all your plans. Detest them."[144]

"I-isn't telling me to detest them too much…?"

"First off, even though you've already made preparations for the journey, you're just acting to inflate your value, right? That's something you learned from me."

Eh?

Preparations… Ah, was he talking about this suitcase? This was the suitcase I had inherited from Ougi-san, filled with more than a hundred fifty pages of worthless manuscripts…

Speaking of which, in the beginning, Kaiki-san had said something about heading to a danger zone, right? I didn't think that he'd figured out the contents of my suitcase, but I had assumed it was a snide remark and me stepping into the manga industry… But

preparations for the journey?

"That's right. Our flight has already been reserved—we're heading off to Okinawa, Iriomote Island. That's the current hideout of the headquarters of the snake that squirms with evil spirits, Araundo Uroko."

"O–Okinawa? Iriomote Island?"

"No. If you ask her, it's not the front, but the island in the back."[145]

Kaiki-san sounded like he was wrapping things up with that nonsensical statement, but please wait. By "flight", were we flying off to Okinawa right now?

"I've never been to Okinawa before. Actually, I've never even been on a plane before, you know? My first trip outside the prefecture is to Okinawa? *That* Okinawa? With a bunch of scary snakes?"

"A perfect place for an expert snake-catcher like you to show off your skills. You'll make easy money,"

said Ononoki-chan.

She was monotone as always, but she seemed excited at the thought of going to Okinawa.

"Congratulations, Nade*kou*. You can boast about how your first trip outside the prefecture was to Okinawa—to fishermen."

"How could I boast about it when fishermen already live there? Wh-what about you, Kaiki-san? You don't really give off that impression, but you're the leader, and you're staying as calm as a tour guide, so does that mean you've been to Okinawa before?"

"Nope."

Kaiki-san slowly shook his head.

With sunglasses on his face.

"It's quite the coincidence, but not once in my life have I ever been to Okinawa."

006

And so, those of us from Hypocrisy Co., Ltd. ended up suddenly setting off for Okinawa, and in fact, a deserted island, in the middle of winter—and what would await us there? A *habu*[146], or an *erabu*[147]?

Oh yeah, during the plane ride, I was told this by Kaiki-san (for a fee of five hundred yen), but apparently, the true name of Araundo Uroko is actually Gaen Uroko? Supposedly, she's the unforgivable daughter of Gaen Izuko-san.

A backstory that couldn't be told up front.

Afterword

If I were to say it, life is just a series of regrets, filled with the idle complaints of, “It would’ve been better if I’d done this,” or “It would’ve been better if I’d done that.” But it’s impossible to ascertain whether it really would have been “better if I’d done this” or “better if I’d done that”, and it depended on what you use to define what’s “better”, but by the time you think that, I feel like it would already be “being worse” in the present progressive tense. Perhaps “It would’ve been better if I didn’t have any regrets” is closer to the truth of the matter? But in that case, I’d be afraid of making the same mistakes, but I could also say, is it really all that great to make different mistakes? It was simply raising the chances of receiving a fatal injury… Perhaps continuing to survive in spite of your mistakes is more tied to your growth as a person, compared to just continuing to survive normally? If life really was a series of regrets, the fact that it’s a series to begin with is unbelievably fortunate… The fact that you’re still regretting means that you’re still alive. Even saying “it’s over” is no excuse for a series that has continued for over fifteen years, past its own conclusion.

It doesn’t need to be said, but the topic of this volume is not “regret” but “apology”, and if you were to split that into two parts, “apology (謝罪)” becomes “apologizing (謝)” and “sin (罪)”, differentiating between “things you apologize for” and “things that are sins”. The text itself discusses the balance between “anger” and “apology” (the imbalance?), but perhaps “apologizing” and “sin” share the same level of balance. I was excited to see how Araragi-kun’s university arc would turn out as I wrote it, so it was a surprise to see that the dark side of his high school years, which he should have graduated from, had resurfaced. In his own way, has Araragi-kun broadened his horizons? With that, even if you gaze into the abyss, this was like an abyss that doesn’t gaze back at you, “Episode 6: Ougi Light”, “Episode 7: Ougi Flight”. The Nadeko arc is also reaching the best part, but I’d like to keep it simple and bright when I write it.

The cover illustration portrays Ougi-chan (-kun?) wearing a hybrid of a *gakuran* and a skirt. Wonderful. VOFAN-san, thank you very much. The next volumes will finally be Monster Season, “Shinomonogatari (1)” and “Shinomonogatari (2)”. It’ll be the reappearance of Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster, and if possible, I’d like to publish both volumes together.

NISIOISIN

Translator's Afterword

Perhaps saying that I feel apologetic for my translations is not exactly the right way to describe it, but I suppose I'd like to admit my own flaws all the same. It's not exactly convincing to hear someone apologize for their work if it implies that that work is inferior in some way, but then again, wouldn't a humble apology be preferable to arrogant posturing? The best thing might be to not say anything at all, but I can't keep myself from asserting my presence in these sorts of things. In generous terms, it's to serve as a reminder that a translation can be influenced by its translator, but in not-so-generous terms, it's just a way to leave my mark on this world. Since the theme of this volume was "apology", I figured I'd go along with it and write a few words myself. I suppose that makes me arrogant after all.

The title of the first arc was perhaps selfishly translated as "Ougi Light" to preserve an antonymic balance with a previous title, "Ougi Dark", in accordance with the "front-and-back" themes seen in the novel, but the Japanese *raito* can actually refer to several different English words. Could it be "right", referring to those apologizing for their wrongdoings? Could it be "write", referring to the enactment and subsequent amendment of the *ayamarei*'s commands? Or could it even be "rite", referring to the idea that apologies are a ritual? Who knows if even the author himself considered all of these possibilities. It's up to your imagination whether he's a genius or a fool. ("Ougi Flight" seems to be a more definitive reference to the flight to Okinawa mentioned in the arc, but feel free to consider that it may actually be "Ougi Fright".)

On behalf of the author, I would like to thank you for reading "Ougimonogatari"—and, of course, I would like to thank you for reading my translation.

Polaris

Updated January 24, 2024

Notes

[←1]

The speaker uses 者 *mono*, which is a relatively more formal or respectful word for “person” (as opposed to just 人 *hito*).

[←2]

物語 *monogatari* “stories”, 物事 *monogoto* “everything”.

[←3]

表 *omote* and 裏 *ura* are Japanese concepts that I've translated as "front" and "back" here, respectively. They can refer to the literal front side and back side of something, but figuratively *omote* can mean the image one wishes to show to outsiders or the public, while *ura* can mean the image one holds in private, behind closed doors.

[←4]

Koyomi puns mystery author 江戸川乱歩 Edogawa Ranpo with 初歩 *shoho* (“basics”). The final kanji is the same.

[←5]

命日 “deathday” reads as *meinichi*, which gets shortened to *meni* in 命日子 Meniko. Originally, the word “many” was written in English as a pun on her name.

[←6]

There are two ways to write “egg” in kanji, as shown (with different connotations).

[←7]

Normally the comparison would be 酸性 *sansei* “acidity” to アルカリ性 *arukarisei* “alkalinity”, but Meniko uses the homophone 賛成 *sansei* “approval” instead.

[←8]

In the previous line, Koyomi uses 肝 *kimo* “main point”, and then follows up in this line with 肝試し *kimodameshi*, which commonly means “test of courage”. Taken literally, it could mean that he’s being tested to find the main point.

[←9]

Meniko uses the terms 被害 *higai* and 加害 *kagai* which I've translated here as "receiving harm" and "causing harm", respectively. Koyomi mentions that she leaves out the 者 character (meaning "person"), which would make 被害者 *higaisha* "victim" and 加害者 *kagaisha* ("perpetrator"). Using the abstract concepts instead of the more concrete people does seem to make it more complicated.

[←10]

The original line is ふたつ返事で穴ふたつ *futatsu henji de ana futatsu*. ふたつ返事 *futatsu henji*, literally “two responses”, is a figure of speech for “a quick answer”, often used in the sense of quickly accepting a request without thinking too deeply about it. This is mixed with the phrase 人をのろわば穴二つ *hito o norowaba ana futatsu*, which means “If you curse someone, dig two graves” (essentially meaning you are hurting yourself as well as the person you curse).

[←11]

夜這い *yobai* refers to an ancient Japanese practice where a man would sneak into a woman's bedroom at night to sleep with her. Apparently, when it was common, it was something that took place between willing individuals, but the term has also been used to refer to non-consensual acts. I would normally leave this as just *yobai*, but it comes up often enough that I translated it to "night-crawling" for readability.

[←12]

There was a minor pun here with 逸れる *soreru* (“digress”) and それ *sore* (“that”).

[←13]

御免 *gomen* “pardon”. 免状 *menjou* “permit” is prefixed with the honorific 御 *go* to make 御免状 *gomenjou* as a pun.

[←14]

免許 *menkyo* uses the same kanji as 免じて *menjite* “for their sake” and 許す *yurusu* “to forgive”.

[←15]

すみません *sumimasen* is a common Japanese expression that means “excuse me” (or “sorry” or “thank you”, depending on the context), but it can be taken literally to mean “unresolved”. So the pun is, “Things wouldn’t be resolved with a ‘sorry’, so I’ll say it’s ‘unresolved’.”

[←16]

Droit du seigneur: literally “right of the lord”, refers to a supposed legal right in medieval Europe that allowed feudal lords to sleep with women on their wedding nights, before even the groom. I normally would not make a note explaining this, but for whatever reason it has a proper Japanese term (初夜権 *shoyaken*), so it could potentially be a more recognizable term in Japanese than the French term is in English.

[←17]

睡姦 *suikan*, “sex with a sleeping person”. Koyomi considers that the word was actually 酔漢 *suikan*, “drunkard’, instead.

[←18]

青い鳥文庫 Aoitori Bunko is a collection of books published by Kodansha aimed at elementary school children.

[←19]

彼クン *kare-kun*, quite literally “boyfriend-kun”. It’s supposed to be a little cringey, so I played up the cringe factor a bit more.

[←20]

Earlier, Koyomi uses 逆説 *gyakusetsu* for “paradox”. He then takes the 説 *setsu* (“theory”) kanji and relates it to 道聴塗説 *douchoutosetsu*, which means the “shallow-minded mouthing of secondhand information”. The latter isn’t actually a “theory”, so it’s really just a kanji pun.

[←21]

Two literary movements that took place in Japan. In particular, 新本格 *shinhonkaku* is a subgenre of the mystery genre under which some of Nisio's works can be classified.

[←22]

Refers to formatting the columns of writing (Japanese novels display text vertically) into two rows. Kodansha Novels is well-known for publishing books in this format. As far as I can tell, it's an older style of formatting that's starting to be used less often.

[←23]

契りを交わす *chigiri o kawasu*. Literally “exchanging vows” (e.g. in marriage), but 契り *chigiri* meaning “vows” can be a figure of speech for “sexual relations”.

[←24]

The speaker here uses 間違っても *machigattemo*, which figuratively means “no matter what happens”, and then uses 間違えていても *machigaeteitemo*, which is the same word with a different inflection, thus indicating the literal meaning of “even if I’m wrong”.

[←25]

駅近 *ekichika*, “close to a station”, a common descriptor for good real estate. 激近 *gekichika* is just a made up word to pun on *ekichika*, but the kanji together mean “terrifically close”.

[←26]

逆鱗 *gekirin*, lit. “reverse scale”. According to legend, a dragon had a single scale that was oriented in a different direction from all of its other scales. This “reverse scale” was considered its weak point, and touching it would send the dragon into a frenzy. It is used figuratively to describe something that causes a person to get enraged. The usage of this here could also be a pun on the previous usage of *gekichika*.

[←27]

The common procedure when praying at a shrine is two bows, two claps, and then one bow.

[←28]

新年ムード *shinnen muudo* “New Year’s mood”, 真剣モード *shinken moodo* “serious mode”.

[←29]

はぐらかす *hagurakasu* “to avoid”, ハグ *hagu* “hug”.

[←30]

The Japanese title of *Gone with the Wind* uses a somewhat uncommon inflection of the verb “to go”, 去りぬ *sarinu* “to be gone”. The verb “to go” can also be inflected as 去らぬ *saranu*, “to not go”. In the original, Hitagi is confused as to whether it means she has or hasn’t gone.

[←31]

Wordplay on 悔やむ *kuyamu* “to repent” and 病む *yamu* “to suffer from a disease”.

[←32]

Again, the speaker uses 者 *mono*, a more formal or respectful way of saying “person” (see footnote 1).

[←33]

The phrase referred to here is 一般のかた *ippan no kata*, or “ordinary people”. かた *kata* is yet another formal or respectful way of saying “person”.

[←34]

The previous line and this one are all terms that include 者 *mono*.

[←35]

ものものしい *monomonoshii* “pretentious”. A pun on the earlier *mono*.

[←36]

彼女 *kanojo* can simply mean “she, her” but can also mean “girlfriend”. Koyomi used “she” to refer to her in the previous line.

[←37]

The speaker uses 被加学的 *hikagakuteki*, which is a made-up word based off of 非科学的 *hikagakuteki* “unscientific” but replacing *hi* and *ka* with the 被 *hi* from 被害 *higai* “receiving harm” and the *ka* from 加害 *kagai* “causing harm”.

[←38]

過剰 *kajou* “excessive” and 異常 *ijou* “abnormal”, translated as “extraordinary” to attempt some sort of play on words.

[←39]

綴じる *tojiru* “to bind together” (used here in the context of stapling something together) and 閉じる *tojiru* “to close”.

[←40]

死相 *shisou* “shadow of death”, 思想 *shisou* “way of thinking”.

[←41]

反省 *hansei* “contemplate”, 帰省 *kisei* “homecoming”.

[←42]

ごめんなさい *gomennasai* means “sorry”, but when written with kanji as 御免なさい the way Shinobu does it, it looks like the word 御免 *gomen* “sorry” with なさい *nasai*, a suffix that makes verbs into a command. She likens this to 左様なら *sayounara*, which would commonly mean “goodbye”, but when taken as two separate words 左様 *sayou* and なら *nara*, it can mean “in that case”.

[←43]

カリスマ *karisuma* “charisma”, アーリーサマー *aariisamaa* “early summer”.

[←44]

The term for “nutrients” is 栄要素 *eiyouso*, but the text uses 栄要素 *ei youso* using 要素 *youso* “components”.

[←45]

Referencing the idiom 門前の小僧習わぬ経を読む, which literally means “A young monk outside the temple gate can read sutras he has never studied.” Relatedly, Shinobu refers to “that Hawaiian-shirt brat” using 小僧 *kozou* from the idiom, which can also mean “young monk”.

[←46]

謝罪 *shazai* “apology” shares kanji with 罪 *tsumi* “sin”. The words have come up before, but this might be the first time highlighting their similarity.

[←47]

Higasa uses うち *uchi* as a first-person pronoun, which is gives off a casual, girly vibe. Though not specifically pointed out by Koyomi, she also ends her sentences with ッス *ssu*, which is basically a slangy version of the formal です *desu*. The use of katakana over hiragana could suggest that it's somewhat unnatural.

[←48]

気が抜けた *ki ga nuketa*, “lost heart” and 垢抜けた *akanuketa* “became stylish”.

[←49]

A line from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, attributed to Lü Meng.

[←50]

暖簾に腕押し *noren ni ude oshi* and 糠に釘 *nuka ni kugi*, two expressions that both mean “unresisting” or “worthless”. Translated literally because the meanings are expanded on.

[←51]

晴れる *hareru* “to be cleared (of suspicion)”, 晴れがましい *haregamashii* “ostentatious”.

[←52]

カドメイア *kadomeia* “Cadmean”, 角番 *kadoban* “make-or-break”.

[←53]

納得 “to understand” or “to agree” shares kanji with 納刀 “sheathing a sword”.

[←54]

あした *ashita* is given as the abbreviated form of ありがとうございました *arigatou gozaimashita*, meaning “thank you”.

[←55]

片付け *katazuke* “cleanup”, 片付く *katazuku* “to finish”, 片手間 *katatema* “spare time”.

[←56]

生き抜く *ikinuku* “to survive”, 息抜き *ikinuki* “taking a breather”.

[←57]

知見 *chiken* “information”, 治験 *chiken* “clinical trial”.

[←58]

Koyomi repeats 結構 *kekkou* “fine” twice and then says こけこっこう *kokekkou*, the onomatopoeia for a rooster crowing. Not particularly meaningful beyond just the repetition of sounds.

[←59]

荷台 *nidai* “luggage rack”, 難題 *nandai* “challenge”.

[←60]

ノリ *nori* “mood”, 乗り *nori* “riding”.

[←61]

一貫性 *ikkansei* “consistency”, 一過性 *ikkasei* “transience”.

[←62]

四捨五入 *shishagonyuu* refers to “rounding”. 捨てる *suteru* “throw away”, 入る *hairu* “enter”, 拾う *hirou* “pick up”.

[←63]

命令形 *meireikei* “imperative form” (or “command form”, as in grammar), and 命令系統 *meireikeitou* “chain of command”.

[←64]

The kanji for 怪異 *kaii* “oddity” is reused here in 怪しい *ayashii* “uncertain” and 異なる *kotonaru* “to be odd”, before ending with the homophone 妖しい *ayashii* “bewitching”.

[←65]

Like all oddity names, these are made-up terms, but I've translated 妖魔令 *ayamarei* as "phantom command", and 妖魔霊 *ayamarei* as "phantom spirit". The important thing to note is that *ayamarei* sounds like 謝れ *ayamare*, which is "apologize" in the imperative form. All further instances of *ayamarei* use the "phantom command" meaning.

[←66]

Ougi references the idiom 白羽の矢が立つ *shiraha no ya ga tatsu*, which literally means “A white-feathered arrow sticks out,” but is used for when someone has been chosen or singled out. Ougi amends 白羽 *shiraha* “white-feathered” with 白蛇 *shirohebi* “white snake”.

[←67]

迷う *mayou* is used in the context of “to hesitate” here, but the more common definition would be “to get lost”.

[←68]

Mayoi says 可良々不. The kanji here are used in a grading system often seen in Japanese universities. Converting to letter grades, 可 would be D, 良 would be C, and 不 would be F, so Koyomi's report card would be DCCF. The pun here is that 可良々不 looks visually similar to 阿良々木 "Araragi". (In terms of the grading system, the pronunciation would actually be *ka ryou ryou fu*, but I've left it as Kararafu to preserve some similarity in English.)

[←69]

頭隠して髪隠さず *atama kakushite kami kakusazu* “hiding your head without hiding your hair” references the expression 頭隠して尻隠さず *atama kakushite shiri kakusazu* “hiding your head without hiding your bottom”, which suggests that you are foolishly believing that you have hidden everything when you have only hidden one part. 髪 *kami* “hair” is also a pun on 神 *kami* “god”, and there could also be a reference to the term 神隠し *kamikakushi* “spiriting away”.

[←70]

絵馬 *ema* are wooden plaques that people write wishes on at Japanese shrines.

[←71]

暗躍 *an'yaku* means “maneuvering behind the scenes”, but it contains the kanji 暗 *an* for “darkness”, hence Koyomi mentioning that it's literal.

[←72]

When Koyomi says “whoops”, he says おっと *otto*, which can be written as 夫 *otto* “husband”. Mayoi riffs off “husband” and brings up “brother” next.

[←73]

A threefold pun here. Koyomi says how this is ガチ *gachi* “serious”, and Mayoi follows up about how being tied down to the mountain is がちがち *gachigachi* “rigid”. Finally, Koyomi makes a reference to カチカチ山 *Kachi-kachi Yama* (or *Kachi-kachi Mountain*), which is the title of a Japanese folktale (though the folktale itself isn’t relevant).

[←74]

Koyomi specifically mentions 東京都 *toukyouto*, the Tokyo Metropolis. Mayoi follows up with 小京都 *shoukyouto*, which is a nickname for towns that resemble Kyoto.

[←75]

Koyomi uses two phrases, 身も蓋もない *mi mo futa mo nai* “blunt” or “straightforward” (translated here as “not mincing her words”), and 元も子もない *moto mo ko mo nai* “losing everything”. There’s parallelism in the grammatical structure that was hard to convey in English.

[←76]

上京 *joukyou* “going to the capital”, 状況 *joukyou* “situation”.

[←77]

Mayoi first says そんな程度の問題なのですよ *sonna teido no mondai nano desu yo*, which means “That’s about the degree of the problem,” but somewhat dismissively. She then changes it to そんな程度問題なのですよ *sonna teido mondai nano desu yo*, where 程度問題 *teido mondai* means “problem of degree”, or a problem of whether something is appropriate or inappropriate depending on the degree of usage.

[←78]

A pun on メンクイ *menkui* “looks-obsessed” and 面食らう *menkurau* “be taken aback”.

[←79]

米搗きバッタ *kometsuki-batta* is the “Oriental longheaded locust”, but can figuratively refer to an “obsequious” or “brown-nosing” person. Mayoi circles back to the “locust” meaning when referencing 蝗害 *kougai* “locust plague”.

[←80]

真理 *shinri* “truth”, 心理 *shinri* “state of mind”.

[←81]

試し行動 *tameshi koudou*, lit. “experimental conduct”. A parenting term that refers to a stage in a child’s development where the child will begin to act out in order to test how much their parent or guardian will allow.

[←82]

謝らせ *ayamarase* is the causative root form of 謝る *ayamaru* “to apologize”. As you may have seen, it sounds similar to Manase.

[←83]

本命 *honmei* “favorite to win” contains 命 *inochi* “life”.

[←84]

徳政令 *tokuseirei*. Refers to orders to cancel debt that were enacted in medieval Japan.

[←85]

生類憐れみの令 *shourui awaremi no rei*. A collection of laws passed in the Tokugawa shogunate to protect animals, particularly dogs, from harm.

[←86]

凌ぐ *shinogu* “to get through”, 忍ぶ *shinobu* “to endure”.

[←87]

傷物 *kizumono*, “damaged goods”, but also a slang term for “a woman who has lost her virginity”.

[←88]

妖しい *ayashii* “bewitching” shares kanji with 妖魔令 *ayamarei*.

[←89]

激情 *gekijou* “violent emotion”, 劇場 *gekijou* “theatrical”.

[←90]

座りこよみ *suwari koyomi* appears to be a pun on 座り込み *suwarikomi* “sit-down strike”, which is basically what Koyomi was doing earlier.

[←91]

腹を割る *hara o waru* “to have a heart-to-heart”, but literally “to split the belly open”. It’s then followed up with 竹を割ったよう *take o watta you* “straightforward” or “open-hearted”, but literally “as though bamboo was split”.

[←92]

地縁 *chien* “regional connections”, 遅延 *chien* “delay”.

[←93]

何様でもない *nanisama demo nai* “was nobody special”, and 同様 *douyou* “the same”. The kanji look similar enough that this is likely a visual pun.

[←94]

待ち伏せ *machibuse* “ambush”, ひれ伏せ *hirefuse* “prostration”.

[←95]

おもてなし *omotenashi* “hospitality”. Not etymologically related to 表 *omote* “front side” or “public-facing side” (pairing with 裏 *ura* “back side” or “private-facing side”, as mentioned in an earlier note), but they do sound similar.

[←96]

言葉で射る *kotoba de iru* “to shoot off words”. The kanji used in 謝る *ayamaru* “to apologize” has the components of 言 “word” and 射る “to shoot”.

[←97]

食材 *shokuzai* “ingredients”, 贖罪 *shokuzai* “atonement”.

[←98]

In Japanese, 足首 *ashikubi* “ankle” is a kind of 首 *kubi* “neck”.

[←99]

After she starts screaming, Ochiba repeats あやまれ *ayamare* in hiragana, so the meaning isn't obvious. It might be assumed to be 謝れ *ayamare* "apologize", but it's ultimately revealed that she means 誤れ *ayamare* "err" or "make a mistake" (the full sentence being 道を誤れ *michi o ayamare*, which I've translated as "stray from the right path").

[←100]

進学 *shingaku* “proceeding to a higher school (esp. university)”, 進化 *shinka* “evolution”.

[←101]

オチ *ochi* “punch line”, おちおち *ochiochi* “calm”.

[←102]

ためになる *tame ni naru* “beneficial”, 駄目になる *dame ni naru* “destructive”.

[←103]

念じる *nenjiru* “to pray”, 怨念 *onnen* “grudge”, 観念 *kannen* “idea, notion”.

[←104]

十八番 *ohako* figuratively means “one’s specialty”, but the kanji literally says “eighteenth” (if you read it as *juuhachiban*). Ougi then says it should be 十三番 *juusanban* “thirteenth”, referencing the thirteen possibilities from earlier.

[←105]

言葉尻を捉える *kotobajiri o toraeru* “to pounce on someone’s words”, 尻について回る *shiri ni tsuitemawaru* “follow someone around”, and 尻拭い *shirinugui* “cleaning up after someone’s mess” all contain the word 尻 *shiri* “butt, behind”.

[←106]

救う *sukuu* “to save”, 掬う *sukuu* “to scoop”.

[←107]

落ちこぼれ *ochikobore* “dropout”, 零れ落ちた *koboreochita* “spilled out”.

[←108]

Koyomi says 心寂しい *kokorosabishii* “lonely”, but puts うら *ura* as the furigana for 心 *kokoro* “heart”. Once again, 裏 *ura* is the “back side” or “private-facing side”. 裏切り *uragiri* means betrayal, and also contains 裏 *ura*.

[←109]

頭を隠して尻尾も出さない *atama o kakushite shippo mo dasanai* “she’s hiding her head and not showing her tail, either”, referencing the expression 頭隠して尻隠さず *atama kakushite shiri kakusazu* “hiding your head without hiding your bottom” (see footnote 69).

[←110]

徹頭徹尾 *tettoutetsubi* means “thoroughly” or “through and through”, containing the kanji for 頭 “head” and 尾 “tail”.

[←111]

蛇頭蛇尾, literally meaning “snake head, snake tail”, which references the expression 龍頭蛇尾 *ryuutoudabi*, which literally means “dragon head, snake tail” but figuratively refers to something with a strong beginning and weak ending. Since both the head and the tail are of a snake, it suggests that it’s both a weak beginning and a weak ending.

[←112]

蛇の道 *hebi no michi*, literally “snake’s path”. Refers to the expression 蛇の道は蛇 *hebi no michi wa hebi*, which figuratively means “it takes one to know one”. Nadeko is implying (or hoping) that she and Uroko are not of the same kind.

[←113]

失望 *shitsubou* “disappointment”, 人望 *jinbou* “popularity”.

[←114]

首の皮一枚 *kubi no kawa ichimai*. The literal meaning suggests “the neck is hanging on by a small bit of skin”, figuratively meaning “with a tiny shred of hope”. (The full context is 首の皮一枚も残っていない, so there isn’t even a shred of hope remaining.)

[←115]

こんな風に *konna fuu ni* “like this”, 風穴 *kazaana* “air holes”.

[←116]

実態 *jittai* “reality”, 実体 *jittai* “existence.

[←117]

白昼夢 *hakuchuumu* “daydream” (literally “white day dream”), 白蛇 *shirohebi* “white snake”.

[←118]

節穴 *fushiana* “knotholes”, figuratively means “blind” or “bad eyes”.

[←119]

The previous line uses 胸が空く *mune ga suku* “refreshing” which literally means “heart is empty”.

[←120]

劣勢 *ressei* “inferiority”, 虚勢 *kyosei* “bold front”.

[←121]

ざまあみろ *zamaamiro* “You deserve it”, can also literally mean “Look at the sorry state you’re in”. ざま *zama* means “sorry state”, and Nadeko puns on this with 女王さま *joou-sama* “queen” (translated here as “Her Majesty”), with *-sama* being an honorific to show great respect for those of higher rank.

[←122]

難しい *muzukashii* “difficult”, むずかる *muzukaru* “to be peevish”.

[←123]

原因 *gen'in* “cause”, 元凶 *genkyou* “main culprit”.

[←124]

同じ穴の狢 *onaji ana no mujina*, literally “badgers of the same hole”. An idiom similar to “birds of a feather”, but the literal meaning was kept for the sake of the “hole” reference.

[←125]

髪の短きは七不思議を隠せず *kami no mijikaki wa nanafushigi kakusezu*, the meaning as translated above. Refers to the phrase 髪の長きは七難隠す *kami no nagaki wa shichinan kakusu*, “Long hair can hide even the Seven Misfortunes,” a phrase suggesting that long hair can hide a girl’s other faults.

[←126]

答える *kotaeru* “to respond”, 報える *kotaeru* “to be hard on”.

[←127]

スクラップ・アンド・ビルド, literally “scrap and build” in English. Refers to an idea in Japanese housing of just knocking down old houses and building new ones, as opposed to renovating or remodeling existing houses.

[←128]

逆立つ *sakadatsu* “to stand on end”, 逆鱗 *gekirin* “reverse scale” (see footnote 26), 逆撫子 *saka-Nadeko* “Anti-Nadeko”. All using the 逆 kanji for “reverse”.

[←129]

中傷 *chuushou* “defamation” can be literally read as “medium wound”.

[←130]

手下 *teshita* “minion”, 三下 *sanshita* “small fry”.

[←131]

コバンザメ *kobanzame* “remora, suckerfish, sharksucker”. Ends with *zame*, a form of 鮫 *same* “shark”, which could make people think that it’s a shark.

[←132]

Referencing the phrase 腐っても鯛 *kusattemo tai*, with a similar meaning to “A diamond on a dunghill is a precious diamond still”. Note that sharksuckers have no relation to sea breams.

[←133]

自業自得 *jigoujitoku*, “you reap what you sow”. 自縄自縛 *jijoujibaku*, “being caught in your own trap”. The latter is literally “being tied by your own rope”, where Yotsugi follows up by replacing “rope” with “snake”.

[←134]

龍頭蛇尾 *ryuutoudabi*, literally “dragon head, snake tail” and figuratively “strong beginning, weak ending (see footnote 111). 上首尾 *joushubi* “great success”, literally uses the kanji for “upper, neck, tail”.

[←135]

撞着語法 *douchakugohou* “oxymoron”, 誤報 *gohou* “false report”.

[←136]

一筋縄ではいかない *hitosujinawa de wa ikanai*, “can’t be done by ordinary means”, literally “can’t be done with a single rope”.

[←137]

やる *yaru* “to do”, やれやれ *yareyare* “good grief”.

[←138]

毒を食らわば皿まで *doku wo kurawaba sara made* “If you eat poison, you may as well lick the plate”, a phrase meaning that if you’ve committed a crime, you may as well devote yourself to being a criminal. Nadeko appends “snake” to this as per usual.

[←139]

人類を滅ぼす *jinrui o horobosu* “to overthrow humanity”, 罪を滅ぼす *tsumi o horobosu* “to atone for one’s sins”.

[←140]

ドロー *doroo* “draw”, どろどろ *dorodoro* “muddy”.

[←141]

Nickname once used in “Mayoi Snake”. 公爵 *koushaku* means “duke”.

[←142]

腹が立つ *hara ga tatsu*, “to get angry”. The literal meaning is something like “(anger) rises in one’s stomach”, and Nadeko follows up with 蛇腹 *jabara* which is literally “snake stomach”.

[←143]

A superstition in Japan states that whistling at night will summon snakes.

[←144]

破棄 *haki* “to dispose of”, 唾棄 *daki* “to detest”.

[←145]

西表島 *Iriomote-jima* “Iriomote Island” contains 表 *omote* “front side”.

[←146]

Written as 毒蛇 “poisonous snake” with the furigana ハブ *habu* for the “Okinawa habu”.

[←147]

Written as 海蛇 “sea snake” with the furigana エラブ *erabu* for the “*erabu umi hebi*” (also common in Okinawa).